

CHECK 001



luck like a button (can't stop pushing it)

fic by diogxnes

cover art by pixelated.paradox

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Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - No Powers, Alternate Universe - No Upside Down, Friendship, Multi, Mutual Pining, Robin Buckley-centric, a lot of yearning, robin and steve are both terrible wingmen but they're trying their best, this fic is intersectional in that everyone is both very gay and very stupid, you all know the drill

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Summary:

When they've left, Robin says, carefully, "They're cool."

"Huh? Oh—" Steve is flustered, and if Robin weren't still feeling so off-balance herself, she'd laugh at him. "Yeah. Nancy seems nice."

"You exhibited some remarkable self-control, not flirting with her with her boyfriend standing right there."

"Oh, come on," says Steve, "I haven't stooped *that* low."

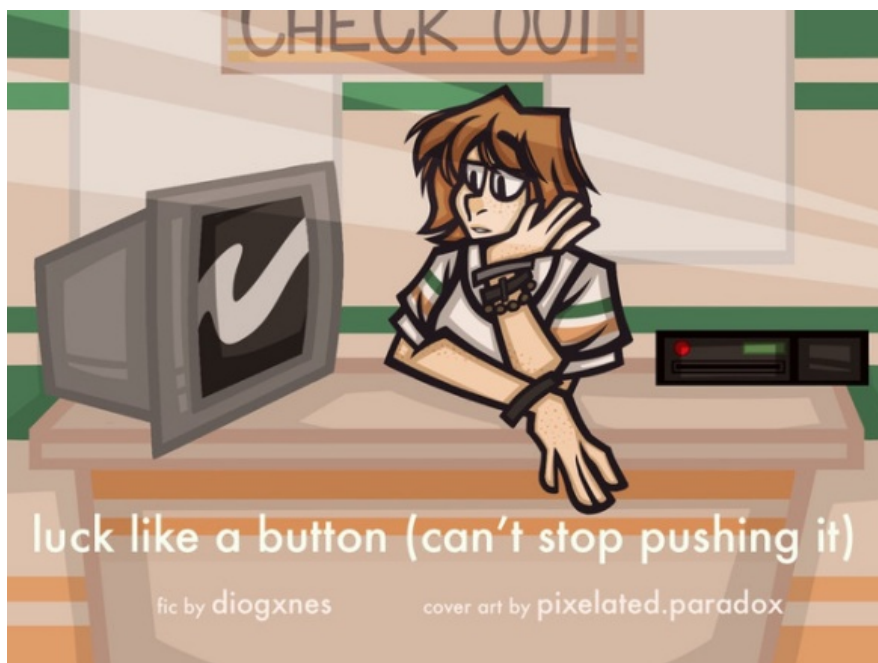
(In which Robin makes some friends, finds a family, and, in spite of herself, falls in love.)

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Author's Note:

This fic was completed as part of the 2021 Stranger Things Big Bang and includes original artwork by [pixelated-paradox](#). Many thanks also to [wolfish_willow](#) for the beta reading and invaluable feedback.

Title from the song "Tenderness" by General Public.



The stupid tape rewinder is jammed.

“Dammit,” Robin mutters, punching her finger into the eject button again. “Dammit, dammit, *dammit*. ”

She slaps the little machine, hard, and mutters another curse when

nothing happens but an ominous clicking noise. This is the last thing she needs today. She's tired already and pissed off for some vague, undefinable reason, and if Keith makes a surprise appearance and finds that she's broken the tape rewinder she thinks she'll either burst into tears or quit on the spot. Possibly both.

This isn't the worst job she's had. It's one of the better ones, actually; it's boring as hell but beats waitressing by a mile, and at least she gets to wear her own clothes instead of some stupid standard-issue uniform. She knows she won't actually quit. She won't cry, either. She likes both her dignity and her paycheck a little too much for that.

Still. She glares at the tape rewinder. She could do with one less problem.

"Hey, Robs."

"*Fuck*, how long have you been standing there?" She turns in her chair to look at Steve, who's leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed, watching her. He looks vaguely amused.

"Long enough," he says. "I don't think hitting it is gonna help."

"Yeah? What would you recommend, then, genius?"

Steve crosses the tiny back room to stand beside her. He hits the eject button on the rewinder.

"That's not gonna—"

The tape pops out. "Ta-da," says Steve drily.

"Fuck you."

He cocks an eyebrow at her, smirking, and she knows what he's going to say before he even opens his mouth. "If you insist." His smirk only grows when Robin rolls her eyes. "Haven't you finished the rewinds yet? You've been back here for, like, an hour."

"My work is never done," she sighs, throwing her head back dramatically so that she's looking at Steve upside down.

“More like you’ve just spent the last hour zoning out back here while I do all the hard work up front.”

“You wound me, Harrington,” she says, though he’s right and they both know it.

Already, against her will, she can feel her sour mood lightening. She likes Steve, she really does. It shocked her at first how not-awful he was, this ridiculous washed-up jock who graduated from her high school a year before she did. But she likes working with him. He’s funny. Nice.

She’s pretty sure that he’s her best friend, actually, though she’d never tell him that.

She follows him back out to the front, abandoning the rewinds for now. Keith will be pissed, but she can’t bring herself to care. Keith’s always pissed.

The store’s empty, and she turns to him with an eyebrow raised. “Hard work?” she echoes back to him. “Has there been a *single* customer while I’ve been back there?”

“Nope.” He leans over, resting his elbows on the counter, looking innocent.

“You just got lonely,” Robin concludes. She has to fight to keep the edge of fondness out of her voice. “Is it really that bad out here without my stimulating company?”

“You have no idea.”

The bell jingling above the door stops her from responding. “Welcome to Family Video,” she says, not bothering to look up at whoever entered.

Steve snorts. “You sound like you want to pull out a bunch of Mylar tape and hang yourself with it.”

“Fuck off.”

“Careful, I might have to tell Keith how appalling your customer

service is.”

“You like me too much to get me fired.”

“Really? Wanna bet on it?”

“Hi,” says the girl who’d come in, a little nervously. She looks like she’s been trying to get their attention for a while. Robin almost feels bad, except that she really doesn’t at all. “Um, I was wondering if you could help me find something?”

“Sure thing,” says Steve. The deadpan demeanor he always has around Robin is gone, replaced suddenly with that swaggering charm she found so annoying in high school. He hops right over the counter—Robin rolls her eyes at how incredibly *obvious* he’s being about trying to look cool—and lands next to the girl a little bit clumsily. “What’re we looking for?”

Robin raises an eyebrow at him once the girl has left with her movie. “Score a hot date?”

“I swear to god, if you get out that fucking white board—”

“Is that a no?”

Steve opens his mouth to retaliate, then seems to deflate. “She has a boyfriend,” he mutters.

Robin cackles and reaches under the counter to pull out the white board they’re supposed to use for promotions. She adds one more tally under *You Suck*, laughing and dodging him when Steve tries to knock the marker out of her hand.

—

Robin always wishes she had a car, but she especially wishes it during the winter.

Steve raises his eyebrows as she buckles her bike helmet under her chin. “Sure you don’t want a ride home?”

She’d thought he was making fun of her the first time he asked that.

Now she knows he means it genuinely, but that doesn't make it any less of a blow to her pride.

"What, so you can kidnap me? I think I'm good."

"Fine, whatever." Steve tosses his car keys up in the air, catches them in the other hand. *Show off*, thinks Robin. "See you tomorrow, then."

"See ya, dingus."

It's not a long bike ride home, but it isn't a pleasant one, either, especially on nights like this one. She squints hard against the cold and the wind, her fingers quickly going numb around the handlebars. Honestly, she begins to wish she'd taken Steve up on his offer, pride be damned.

It's late, but when she finally makes it home, there's still a light in the kitchen window. There always is. She knows she should be grateful—she is grateful—but it always makes her heart sink, seeing that light.

She isn't sure what it is. Guilt, maybe, because she doesn't think her mother would wait up for her anymore if she knew her daughter, *really* knew her; shame, for how badly she wants to leave this place, when her mother is still so dependent on her.

"I'm home," she calls softly, shutting the front door behind her. She locks it, then rounds the corner to peer into the kitchen. Her mother is sitting with her back to the door, head tipped back. "Mom?" she whispers, but there's no response. She's asleep.

She sighs. There's dirty dishes in the sink that weren't there this morning; at least her mom appears to have eaten dinner. That's something. And there's a half-empty mug of tea on the table. Robin picks it up, takes it to the sink, rinses it out.

The running water startles her mom awake. "Wha—"

"It's just me, Mom."

"Oh. Okay."

She settles back into her chair, eyes slipping shut again, though

Robin can tell she's still awake.

"How was work?"

"Good. Normal."

"That's good." Then, after a few minutes of silence, "You don't have to do those dishes."

"I know," says Robin. She's already almost done. She wipes the last one dry, puts it carefully away. "Night, Mom."

It won't always be like this, she reminds herself as she retreats down the hallway to her bedroom. You won't be stuck here forever.

—

"Are you—Christ, here come the goblins."

Robin looks up from the receipt paper she's restocking, a question on her lips until she catches sight of the group of kids outside. The question turns into a smirk. "Aww," she coos, "they're here to see their favorite babysitter."

"Fuck off," Steve says without any real bite to it, and she grins.

The bell on the door jingles as they push it open, all six of them shoving their way through at once. They're talking loudly—arguing, it sounds like, though they're all speaking so quickly that Robin can't tell what about—and don't bother greeting either her or Steve. They're too caught up in their own heated discussion to even glance at them until they've reached the counter.

"Do you have Star Trek yet?" demands Mike, the tall one, without even a perfunctory hello.

"Jesus Christ, *again* ? How many times, shitbird, they haven't even—"

"—released it on home video yet, jeez, why are you acting like that's *my* fault?" finishes Dustin, and then flashes Steve a shit-eating grin.

Robin tries, unsuccessfully, to choke back a laugh. She's pretty sure

that's word-for-word what Steve had said to Mike the last time he asked, and probably the time before as well. Steve turns his glare on her.

"But it's been months," Mike whines. Next to him, Lucas rolls his eyes.

"Take it up with Lucasfilm," says Steve.

This, predictably, causes immediate outrage.

"That's *Star Wars*, asshole, not—"

"I can't believe you don't—"

"Are you even qualified for this job?"

"Oh, he's definitely not qualified," Robin interjects helpfully.

Steve throws up his hands. "Ungrateful little assholes," he mutters. He retreats to the back room, though Robin knows he'll be back within minutes. He likes these kids, though he'd never admit that out loud to her or them or anyone.

She's not sure how it happened, exactly, this ragtag group of miniature teenagers deciding to befriend her and Steve. They were just *there* one day, all six of them, tearing through the store like a sugar-fueled hurricane while waiting for one of their older siblings to pick them up from the arcade next door.

"Hey!" Steve had shouted, emerging from behind the counter to stop the little redhead girl who was trying to climb a shelf to reach a high-up movie. "There's a *stool*, peabrain!"

And the rest of the kids had found that hilarious, for some reason. The girl—Max, Robin knows now—had stuck out her tongue, flipped Steve off, but jumped down from the shelf without argument.

"Hooligans," Steve muttered.

"Don't listen to Steve," Robin told the kids as they were checking out. "I saw him doing the exact same thing the other day."

Steve had looked betrayed, but Max had cackled with laughter. And when the whole lot of them returned the next week, they seemed to have already decided that Steve and Robin were their friends.

It's been months now, and somehow, they're still regulars.

They're annoying as shit, but Robin doesn't mind. She kind of likes them, too.

—

She's a little jealous of Steve's apartment.

It isn't pretty, and she's told him as much. It's sparse, boyish, entirely undecorated except for a handful of posters from movies she knows Steve hasn't even seen. They've all been pilfered from work, from the crate in the back where posters go once the movies aren't new enough to be worth advertising anymore. Robin's taken a few herself, more for the satisfaction of the petty theft than for the posters themselves. Then again, it hardly seems like much of a crime, stealing obsolete posters from a bin where no one will ever look at them again. She's not sure why Keith bothers saving them at all.

The apartment isn't pretty. But it's an apartment, and it's *his*, and Robin can't imagine anything better than having her own space like this. And she would decorate it better than he has. She's told Steve this, too.

"You know, I don't *have* to invite you over," he grumbles as he tosses his keys onto the counter.

"No," says Robin smugly, "but you *want* to."

"No, I don't," says Steve. "You just ended up here one day and now I can't figure out how to make you leave."

"Then my plan is working." She flops down on the couch, one of the few pieces of furniture he actually owns. "So what is it tonight?"

It's a routine they've settled into these past few months, her going home with Steve after work to watch a movie together. *Training*, she'd called it at first, when her friendship with Steve was still a new

and baffling thing and she couldn't imagine spending time with him outside of a Family Video context. Now she calls it *hanging out*.

"*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. "

Robin gags.

"What—it's a classic!"

"God, you are *such* a loser."

"Oh, let me guess," says Steve. "You never saw *Fast Times* because you were too cool, right? Because you and your theater friends thought it was a lame movie for jocks?"

"I wasn't a *theater kid*, " says Robin, but doesn't dispute the rest of it because, well. She *had* thought it was a lame movie for jocks.

"Right, sorry," says Steve, not sounding sorry at all. "You and your *band friends* —which, god, how is that *better*?"

"Shut up. Do you have anything to drink?"

He rolls his eyes exaggeratedly. "In the fridge."

"Thanks."

She goes to the kitchen to open the dingy, off-white fridge that she's pretty sure must be older than either of them. It isn't hard to find the beer; it's one of the only things in there, along with a carton of eggs, a pizza box, and a couple condiment bottles.

"What do you even put this ketchup *on*? Your pizza?"

"Absolutely," says Steve, accepting the can of beer she hands him. "It's a delicacy."

She's pretty sure he's kidding, but honestly, she wouldn't be all that surprised if he was serious. She decides not to ask.

He flops down on one end of the couch. Robin mirrors him at the other end, kicking off her shoes and propping her feet up on the

rickety garage-sale coffee table. "Alright," says Steve after a long swig of beer. "Ready to have your mind blown?"

"It's a rom-com for high school kids, Harrington. It's hardly cinema."

"We'll see about that." He picks up the remote, hits play.

—

"You think it's just gonna be this?" she asks him. "Like, forever?"

"What do you mean?"

The movie is over now, the credits rolling quietly in their seemingly endless scroll. It was pretty good, actually. She doesn't think it'll be joining the ranks of her favorites, not by a long shot, but she enjoyed it more than she expected to. More than that, she enjoyed Steve's off-key singing along to the soundtrack. She's not sure if he's actually that incapable of carrying a tune or if he'd just been trying to make her laugh. Either way, it had been endearing, which isn't a term she ever thought she'd apply to him.

She turns toward him, her head lolling against the back of the couch. "This," she says, and gestures vaguely. She's not drunk, she doesn't think, but she definitely isn't sober either. "Working at Family Video. Watching movies. Drinking beer on your couch."

"Doesn't sound so bad," says Steve. He grins lazily at her, tips his can to his lips.

"I'm tired of community college," says Robin, "and living at home. I want to go somewhere. Be someone."

She looks up at the ceiling, but she can feel Steve watching her. She's embarrassed, a bit. It had just come out, the question, without any thought, and now here she is on the verge of spilling all her secrets and hopes and dreams to Steve Harrington of all people. It's a few long seconds before he responds.

"You are someone. And at least you're *in* college."

"At least you have your own place."

“Yeah, well. This is it for me. I’ve got this place, and this job, and nowhere else to go from here. You’re gonna go places, Robs.” He takes another sip. “You’re gonna go somewhere.”

He sounds sincere. Looks it, too. Robin feels somehow, suddenly, inexplicably close to tears. It occurs to her that she might be a little drunker than she thought, and that she’s definitely drunker than he is.

“Thanks,” she says, because she isn’t sure how else to respond.

Steve shrugs. “It’s just the truth.”

—

It’s pouring rain the first time Robin sees them.

She’s half-asleep behind the counter, chin propped in one hand and absently watching the puddles in the parking lot grow larger. She’s bored, but only in a drowsy, peaceful sort of way, not at all like the desperate tedium of busier days. With not a single customer in the store, and Steve in the back doing rewinds, it’s easy to drift off. Somewhere in the back of her mind she’s aware that she should be cleaning something, or maybe taking the opportunity to catch up on some reading for class, but she can’t quite bring herself to care. It’s so much more pleasant to just stand here and doze.

The bell above the door startles her with its sudden jingling. She blinks her eyes open, annoyed, but relaxes again when she sees it’s just a young couple, probably around her age. That’s the least annoying sort of customer, usually; they’ll talk quietly to each other as they browse instead of yelling across the store, and probably don’t need or want any recommendations. She lets herself drift off again as they disappear down one of the aisles, remaining just alert enough that they won’t have to shove her awake when they’re ready to check out.

It’s Steve who shoves her, less than a minute later when he emerges from the back room. “No sleeping on the job, Buckley,” he says in a stern voice that she knows he doesn’t mean in the slightest.

She grumbles at him. “I’m just resting my eyes.”

“Is my company really so boring?”

“You weren’t even *out* here, dingus,” she reminds him. Then, after a moment, “But yes, it is.”

“Watch it. Has a single person even been in here since I left?”

“Yeah,” says Robin, “there’s—”

The couple emerges from the end of an aisle just as she’s starting to speak. Her voice dies in her throat.

She’d barely even spared them a glance when they came in, had looked up just long enough to notice their age before zoning out again. But they’re closer now, and walking towards her with a stack of movies, and she definitely isn’t ignoring them anymore.

They’re college students, probably, like her, but she’d be willing to bet they go to the university. They just have that look about them—not of wealth, exactly, or even of snobbishness, but a faint air of pretension. She can tell immediately that they both spend a lot of time hunched over musty old books in an ornate library, or whatever it is that students at real universities do. The boy is sort of grungy, artistic-looking, wearing a soft mustard-colored sweater and one of the worst haircuts she’s ever seen. And the girl.

The girl.

She’s tall, thin— *willowy*, Robin’s mind supplies helpfully—with shoulder-length hair in loose curls. Somehow, even in her pastel-pink sweater, she manages to look intimidating. There’s something sharp about her, quick, like she knows she’s the smartest person in every room she walks into and isn’t afraid to remind you of it.

Robin is pretty sure she’s forgotten how to breathe, suddenly.

The couple approaches the counter.

“Hey,” says the girl, causally, airily, like she has no emotional investment whatsoever in this interaction, which of course she

doesn't. "Just these."

"You got it." Robin's surprised by how normal her voice sounds. She slides the stack of tapes across the counter to start scanning them. "Find everything okay?"

Then again, why should she be surprised? She's had years to practice acting nonchalant around girls.

"Yeah, thanks," says the girl.

Robin hands the tapes back. When the girl takes them from her, their fingers brush.

The contact only lasts a moment, and of course it doesn't mean anything. Still, Robin feels her face heating up. *Don't be a fucking idiot*, she berates herself. "Have a nice day," she says. Her voice comes out slightly squeaky this time, she thinks, and she's pretty sure her whole face must be bright red.

"Thanks," says the girl, and smiles.

Robin watches them as they leave, doesn't tear her eyes away from their backs until the door has swung shut behind them. Then she turns to Steve, about to crack some sort of joke—something, anything, to help paper over the fluttering agony in her heart, to smooth away the unbearable awkwardness of that whole encounter.

But Steve isn't looking at her. He's looking at the door, still watching the couple as they cross the parking lot, jogging slightly to minimize their time out in the rain. He has a dazed, wistful look on his face, and Robin's heart sinks.

Steve likes this girl, too.

It doesn't matter anyway, she tells herself. The beautiful couple is a *couple* and, besides, she'll probably never even see them again. So what if Steve has a crush on the girl as well? It's not like Robin would ever have had a chance with her anyway. It doesn't matter.

She drums her fingers on the counter perhaps a little more aggressively than usual, and ignores the look that Steve gives her.

It's quiet the rest of the day. Robin stares out the window and watches the raindrops wind down the glass, thinking, agonizing. *Just these*, the girl had said, *just these*, in her calm, commanding voice. And then her hand had brushed Robin's.

And Steve had stared after her.

She should have teased him about her, Robin realizes with a sinking heart. Any other day, *any* other girl, she would have pulled out her whiteboard the moment she saw the look on his face. *She is literally here with her boyfriend*, she would have said, and drawn another tally under *You Suck*.

But she hadn't done any of that, and she'd stared after the girl just like Steve, and oh, god, what if he—

"Hey," says Steve, jolting her out of her thoughts. "Closing time."

Robin blows out a long breath. She's being stupid. There's no reason Steve should suspect anything—frankly, he probably isn't smart enough for Robin's secret to cross his mind no matter *how* obvious she's being. "Finally," she says.

They lock up largely in silence, having long since stopped needing to speak to each other to go through the closing routine. He stops her, though, as they're leaving, with a hand on her arm. She startled, not having expected the touch, and pulls away instinctively.

"Sorry," he says, "I just—are you okay?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know. No reason. You've just been kinda quiet all day, is all."

She isn't sure what she feels—anxiety and shame at having done such a poor job concealing her feelings, relief and warmth at Steve having noticed. He's a good friend, better than she deserves.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she says, "just tired." She puts on her bike helmet, turns up the hood of her rain jacket, and tries to smile at him. "See

you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you.”

That night, in bed, she lies on her back and stares up at the ceiling.

Have a nice day.

Thanks, and a smile.

This isn't her first crush. Far from it. There have always been girls—her section leader in band, the girl from her junior high soccer team, Tammy from high school history. But all those teenage crushes feel so long ago now. These days, graduated but still living at home, working long shifts at Family Video and biking to community college a couple days a week, romance is never really on her mind. What good would yearning do her anyway, when she knows she'll never be able to act on it? It's just a waste of time. She's learned that the hard way over and over again.

She tells herself this, and yet the girl won't leave her mind.

“Stupid,” she mutters to herself. She rolls forcefully onto her side. “Stupid.”

—

Robin knows before she's even looked up from her doodling who's just come in. There's no one else who slams the door open so forcefully without even a whiff of an apology. And if she hadn't known from that alone, the immediate bickering would have clued her in.

“Good morning, children,” she says, barely glancing up at them. She doesn't have to be looking at them to know that they've all just given her identical eye rolls. “Where are the girls today?”

“At the *mall*, ” says Will in a tone of affected disgust. “Max wanted to take El shopping.”

Robin hides her smile, tries to look as affronted as Will. She knows the kids well enough by now to know that Will is hardly capable of

any real annoyance at his sister. He and El are close, so close that it almost makes Robin wish she had a sibling herself. “And they didn’t invite you guys? How rude.”

Steve pushes open the back room door then, idly chomping on a banana. Robin gets the sense that he hasn’t been accomplishing much back there. “Hey, shi’heads,” he says through his full mouth. He swallows. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

“It’s *Saturday*, Steve.”

“Is it? Huh. Guess it’s hard to keep track as a working man with no days off.”

“You had the day off yesterday,” Robin points out.

Dustin snorts. “Ooh, burn.”

Mike huffs, as if he’s in a hurry to get somewhere and all this chit chat is slowing him down. “Are we gonna get the movie or what?” he demands.

“Jesus, chill out, Wheeler,” says Lucas. “Why don’t you start by actually *finding* the movie?”

Mike rolls his eyes dramatically before walking off, though he seems to brighten a bit when Will joins him to search the shelves for whatever it is they’re looking for.

Robin returns to her doodles, half-listening to whatever Dustin is rambling about. Steve stands beside her, elbows propped on the counter, nodding and humming at appropriate intervals. He’s good with the kids, which had surprised her at first; she wouldn’t have expected it of him. But watching him chat with Dustin and Lucas, and then harass Mike and gently tease Will when they return to the counter, she can’t help but feel a swell of fondness.

—

They’re already there when Robin emerges from the back room.

Really, in retrospect, she shouldn’t be so surprised to see them. It’s a

video rental store, after all; of course they've come back. They have tapes to return. Still, Robin can't stop the flush that creeps up her neck when the girl glances towards the counter and spots her and smiles.

"Hey, dingus," she says to Steve, to distract herself.

"Hey." He sounds absent, distracted, and he isn't even looking at her. She follows his gaze. He's staring at the couple, both of whom are now huddled together to read the back of a tape. "Rewinds done?"

"Yeah. No thanks to you."

"Oh, fuck off."

The banter is halfhearted and she wonders if Steve has noticed it as well, or if he's too absorbed in watching the girl himself to notice that Robin is, too. She's wearing a grey sweater today under a dark denim jacket and her hair is pulled back, a few escaped curls hanging around her face. She looks serious, as Robin imagines she usually does. She just seems like that kind of person.

"Hey," says Steve when they reach the counter. He flashes the girl a smile and Robin feels a hot surge of jealousy at how easy he seems around her, how calm, despite the obvious yearning in his face when he was watching from afar. "How'd you like the movies?"

"Oh," says the boy, "they were for my brother."

"Nice of you," says Steve. He doesn't bother looking at the boy when he speaks; he keeps his eyes trained on the girl.

"Yeah." The boy doesn't seem to know what to do with the compliment, doesn't seem to know if he should respond at all, given that Steve hasn't even glanced at him. It's awkward for a moment, and Robin is almost relieved on his behalf when he pulls out his wallet as if suddenly remembering. "Here. My card."

It's one of the more beat up ones that Robin's seen since starting here, faded and dirty and a little bit bent. It fits the boy, somehow, with his worn-looking face and his slightly ratty clothes.

Steve takes the card and glances at it. “So,” he says smoothly, “which one of you is Joyce Byers?”

The boy laughs. The sound is startled, almost, like he hadn’t expected it even of himself. “That’s my mom,” he says, taking the card back from Steve. “I’m Jonathan.”

So the boy has a name. Jonathan. It suits him, Robin thinks. She wants so badly to ask the girl’s name, too, but even if she could work up the courage to do it she’s not sure she could force herself to produce a single sound right now other than a squeak.

Steve saves her. “Nice to meet you guys. I’m Steve.”

“Nancy,” says the girl, and extends her hand to shake his.

He smiles at her. “That’s a nice name.”

Robin sort of hates the name, actually. She’s never known a Nancy before, not in real life; there’s just Nancy Reagan, which doesn’t inspire much of a positive association. Nancy. It sounds prissy, flouncy, like a name for a teacher’s pet or wannabe preppy girlfriend. It doesn’t seem to match this girl at all—but then again, Robin reminds herself, she doesn’t even know her. Maybe this Nancy is a prissy, flouncy, preppy little teacher’s pet.

Anything’s possible.

She realizes that both Nancy and Jonathan are looking at her, and Steve, too, waiting for her to introduce herself now that the rest of them have. “I’m Robin,” she says, then adds unnecessarily, “I work with Steve.” As if they can’t tell by their matching vests and nametags, by them standing side by side behind the counter. As if Robin hadn’t been the one to ring them up the first time they were here. She flushes. What a stupid thing to say.

But neither of them laugh at her. They just smile, and Nancy, looking a little bit amused but not in a mocking way, says, “Nice to meet you.” She doesn’t extend her hand to Robin the way she had to Steve, but that’s probably for the best, Robin thinks. There’s no need for Nancy to feel how sweaty her palms are.

"You too," she says.

The conversation dies there. There isn't much else to say, beyond the few words that accompany scanning the movie and handing it back and wishing the couple a nice day in some approximation of a polite customer service voice.

When they've left, Robin says, carefully, "They're cool."

"Huh? Oh—" Steve is flustered, and if Robin weren't still feeling so off-balance herself, she'd laugh at him. "Yeah. Nancy seems nice."

"You exhibited some remarkable self-control, not flirting with her with her boyfriend standing right there."

"Oh, come on," says Steve, "I haven't stooped *that* low."

"Really? Because I seem to recall..."

The tension fades quickly as they relax back into their usual back-and-forth. By the time they're closing up for the day, Robin's almost forgotten all about the encounter.

Almost.

—

"*Please*," whines Max. She's got that look on her face, half puppy-dog and half I'll-beat-you-up-if-I-don't-get-my-way. "Why do you even *care*?"

"Because I'm not interested in losing my job, shitbird," says Robin. She shoves the beat-up copy of *The Exorcist* back towards Max and then, on second thought, snatches it away again and stows it safely under the counter. She'll put it back herself.

"I'm practically seventeen," Max insists, and Robin has to choke back a laugh so she can keep pretending to be annoyed.

"You're fourteen."

"That's close enough!"

“Close enough for what?” El has wandered over, apparently bored with the boys’ bickering on the other side of the store.

“Robin won’t let me get *The Exorcist*. ”

El doesn’t even spare Robin a glance. “I’ll steal it for you,” she tells Max, so calmly that Robin isn’t entirely sure she’s not serious.

She’s the quietest of the group by far, El. Robin feels as if she’s hardly ever heard her speak, though she’s here just as often as the rest of the little gremlins. She’s small, too, and looks a little younger than the rest of the kids, though Robin’s pretty sure she’s Will’s twin sister. They all seem to be in the same grade, anyway, based on the stories they tell about school.

Max brightens. “There was another copy on the shelf. I’ll distract her.”

“I’m *right here*, dumbass.”

“Where’s Steve?” Max asks. “ *He* would let me get it.”

He probably would, too, Robin thinks. “It’s his day off.”

“That’s stupid.”

“That’s stupid,” echoes El, and Robin smiles. She doesn’t fully understand El’s odd habit of repeating after people, but she can’t help but find it adorable every time she does it. Honestly, if El had been the one to ask for the movie first instead of Max, Robin probably would have just given it to her. There’s something about those bright, pleading eyes that she just can’t resist.

“Hey!” shouts Lucas from across the room. “Max! El! Get over here!”

“Yeah, come tell Lucas how wrong he is!” Dustin yells.

Max rolls her eyes in what Robin knows is completely feigned irritation, but El giggles. “Come on,” she says to Max, and grabs her hand to pull her across the room.

Max freezes, looking startled, and for a moment Robin thinks she’s

going to pull away. Then—and Robin doesn't miss the slow, deliberate way it happens—she curls her fingers around El's, a dark flush creeping into her cheeks. She doesn't meet Robin's eyes again before being whisked away. That's probably for the best, since Robin is completely unable to stop the surprised smile spreading on her face.

Then again, why should she be surprised? Max always did remind her a little bit of herself.

—

They're closing up the store one night when Steve asks her if she's ever had a boyfriend.

It's friendly, the way he says it—light, conversational. He's just chatting, and it's an innocent enough question, given how close they've somehow become. But all the same it makes her chest tighten with anxiety because, no, she hasn't ever had a boyfriend, and there's a very good reason for that, and it's not a reason she can ever tell Steve or anyone.

"No," she says shortly. Immediately she cringes at herself—it sounds tense, defensive, and that's not how she meant for it to come out even if it is how she feels. "Wasn't anyone I was interested in in high school," she adds, forcing her voice into something a little less anxious-sounding. "And it's not like I've got people lining up for a piece of this ass now that I work full time at a video rental store."

She knows that Steve has dated around a lot. She didn't know him in high school, not really, but she certainly knew *of* him—King Steve, they called him. Steve "The Hair" Harrington. He definitely pulled a whole lot of girls, and, if the rumors were true, he wasn't exactly a gentleman about it.

He's different now. She knows that, too. Because she would never have been friends with the Steve who was a year above her in high school, but this Steve—the one who works at Family Video with her, the one who's somehow become one of the best parts of her stupid, boring life, though she would never tell him that—this Steve is her best friend in the world. But still, she can't help but feel a slight,

ridiculous inkling of shame, as if Steve will think she's *uncool* for never having dated anyone.

He seems unfazed, though. He doesn't smirk, or laugh at her, or make a face of poorly-hidden disgust, and even though she hadn't *really* expected him to do any of those things, she can't help but feel a little bit relieved.

"Good," he says. "Dating in high school is a waste of time." There's not a trace of irony in his voice. Before she has time to really think about this response, though, he wrinkles his nose as if something has just occurred to him. "Wait. Are you saying working at Family Video isn't sexy? Because I take offense to—"

She rolls her eyes, laughing, and chucks an empty VHS cover at his head.

—

This time, they're already there when Robin comes in to work.

They're standing at the counter, facing away from her, but she knows right away that it's them. Nancy's wearing the same dark denim jacket that she had been the last time Robin saw her, and she would know Jonathan's terrible bowl cut anywhere. Steve is chatting with them animatedly.

He looks past them when she enters, stomping the fine, powdery snow from her boots before she tracks it across the store. "Hey, Robs. Bout time you showed your face around here."

"My shift doesn't start for another ten minutes, dingus."

Nancy and Jonathan have both turned to look at her, too. "'Dingus?'" echoes Jonathan, amused.

"It's a miracle he managed to get hired here at all."

"Hey," Steve protests. "I had an *excellent* reference, I'll have you know. And what would you do without me all these days when you can't be bothered to come into work till noon?"

Robin rolls her eyes and joins him behind the counter, shedding her backpack onto the floor and wedging her bike helmet into the tight space under the counter between the extra receipt paper and the box of returns. When she straightens up again, she realizes that Nancy's eyes are on her—scrutinizing her, almost. She resists the urge to run her fingers through her hair. It's probably a disaster, she realizes, after having biked here in the strong wind. Nancy's hair is perfect. It always is.

Nancy doesn't say anything about her hair. Instead she asks, "Did you bike here in the snow?"

"Yeah," says Robin, and then cringes a little at how defensive she sounds. "I'm trying to save up for a car."

Nancy doesn't respond, just smiles. Robin gets the impression—though from what, she isn't quite sure—that Nancy's never had to save up for anything in her life. There's something a little closed off in that smile—not judgmental, exactly, but maybe almost dismissive.

She *is* kind of a priss, Robin decides. An extremely attractive priss, but a priss all the same. It's a disappointing realization, but it does make it a little easier to talk to her without completely clamming up. And why *should* she be disappointed? It isn't as if she ever would have had a chance with Nancy, anyway.

Then Nancy says, "That's impressive, that you bike everywhere."

She sounds genuine. Maybe she isn't a priss after all. Robin isn't sure what to say to that, so she doesn't say anything.

There's an awkward beat of silence.

"I'm saving up too," says Jonathan finally. The tension eases. "I mean, I have a car now, but it barely works. I'm lucky it still runs at all."

Robin glances at him with a grateful smile.

"You need a new car just for a cassette player that actually works," says Nancy. She looks to Steve and Robin with a conspiratorial grin. "He's had the same Talking Heads tape stuck in there for *weeks*. It

won't come out. I'm starting to think he got it stuck in there on purpose just to annoy me."

Steve groans. "That's bleak."

"Right!"

"Don't listen to Steve," Robin tells Jonathan. "He thinks he's cool, but I caught him singing along to ABBA the other day."

"Hey—that was *one time!* "

He throws a pen at her, but Nancy laughs. It's the first time, she realizes—the first time she's heard Nancy laugh.

It's a really nice sound.

Robin's always been a little embarrassed by her own laugh. It's not something she'd admit to anyone, not ever, and she's never minded laughing in front of her friends or in front of Steve or in front of the kids. It's not that it's an *ugly* sound. It's just—it isn't very dignified. As often as not, it ends in a snort.

Nancy's laugh is nothing like that. Nancy's laugh is *beautiful*.

And Robin caused it.

It makes her stomach flood with an unexpected warmth. And though she knows it doesn't mean anything, knows that Nancy has a boyfriend and would never go for someone like Robin even if she didn't, that she herself barely even *knows* Nancy and has no right to be this far gone over her, she can't help but feel that it is absolutely vital that she figure out how to make Nancy laugh again.

She resolves herself to try.

The conversation has moved on without her, she realizes, and she shakes herself, hoping she hasn't been zoned out and staring at Nancy for a noticeable amount of time. "We're both in school," Nancy is saying. Steve must have asked. "I'm studying journalism at the university."

Robin remembers her first impression of Nancy, weeks ago now, and feels somewhat vindicated.

“I’m majoring in photography,” says Jonathan.

“Damn.” Steve, she can tell, is impressed. He grins at them. “I can’t write for shit and I’ve barely even held a camera. That’s really cool.”

“Are you guys in school?” Nancy asks.

Steve’s smile falters almost imperceptibly. “Nah,” he says. “Just working here for now. Real-life job experience, and all that.” He says it cheerfully enough, as if it had been his choice, his plan all along to work at Family Video instead of going to college. Robin certainly isn’t going to contradict him. “Robin is, though,” he adds.

And then Nancy’s eyes are on her again, probing, interested. “What are you studying?”

“Oh, uh—” She sort of wishes that Steve hadn’t said anything. She tells herself every single day that she isn’t ashamed of taking classes at the community college, that she doesn’t bitterly resent being unable to afford a four-year university. But that’s a difficult thing to convince herself of when she’s being asked about it by an incredibly beautiful university student. “I’m just taking classes at the community college.”

“Oh, stop being modest.”

“Steve—”

“Robin’s a *genius*, ” says Steve. “She speaks, like, five languages and she knows everything about music. And she’s read every book that exists.”

“ *Steve —*”

“Five languages?” asks Nancy.

“Four. Including English.”

Her face is burning, she can feel it. She could murder Steve.

“That’s really impressive,” says Jonathan, and then, with a hint of a smile, “and that you’ve read every book that exists, too. Nancy’s only read *most* of them.”

In spite of herself, she smiles back at him.

“Shit,” says Nancy suddenly, glancing down at her watch, “we’ve gotta go—I’m supposed to be watching Holly this afternoon. My sister,” she adds, for Robin and Steve’s benefit.

“Oh—” Jonathan glances at his own watch, too, then nods.

“Well—it was nice talking to you guys.” Nancy’s shoved her hands in her pockets, preparing for the bitter cold outside. She smiles brightly at Steve, then at Robin, who tries—unsuccessfully, probably—to stop herself from blushing again. “Bye.”

“Bye,” says Robin lamely, and then watches them leave, watches Jonathan hold the door open for Nancy and watches them both get into Jonathan’s car together. Eventually, to break the heavy silence that always seems to settle on her and Steve when Nancy and Jonathan have just been there, she asks, “What movies did they get this time?”

Steve looks startled. “What?”

“What movies? Or were they just returning the old ones?”

“Oh.” He seems perplexed, for some reason, like he’s forgotten that he works at a video store. “They, uh. I don’t think they did either? We just...chatted.” He says it as if he himself is just now realizing it.

“Huh.” Robin glances back out the window. There’s tire tracks in the snow from Jonathan’s car. “Maybe they forgot.”

—

Her first thought, when the tire on her bike blows out less than a hundred yards into her journey home, is that maybe she can just walk.

It isn’t that far—two hours, maybe, if she walks quickly. She’s done it

before, on pleasant afternoons when a walk sounded nicer than a bike ride. It's almost scenic in places, winding through a couple of the richer neighborhoods before she gets to her own. It's a good walk for thinking, for clearing her mind.

The problem is that it's not a pleasant afternoon. It's almost nine and pouring rain, which doesn't seem fair for late February; if it's going to precipitate, the least it could do is properly snow. Even the bike ride is about as long as she can bear in this weather and at this time of night. She only left the building a couple minutes ago and she's already soaked through and freezing. Walking is out of the question.

She knows already what she needs to do, though she spends another few minutes just perched on her stationary bike getting drenched before she can work up the willpower. It's not that it's hard, or that she's a coward, or shy. There's no reason to be. But it's definitely a blow to her pride.

Reluctantly, she walks her bike back across the parking lot. There's a payphone just inside the grim, barren building.

The phone is on its fourth ring before someone picks up.

"Family Video, this is—"

"Steve," she interrupts him. "Hey."

"Robin? What's up?"

She sighs heavily, leaning against the wall, and glances out the window at where she's propped her bike up against the side of the building. "I...my bike has a flat tire."

There's a long silence on the other end. "...Okay?"

"I just got out of class."

"Oh," says Steve, and then, "Oh. So you're stranded?"

"Yeah."

Please just offer to come pick me up, she thinks desperately, squeezing

her eyes shut as if that'll strengthen her prayer. *Please don't make me have to ask you. This is embarrassing enough as it is.*

"Uh, I've just got a few more minutes before close," says Steve. "I should be able to get out of here by...9:15, probably, if I'm quick?"

Thank god. She breathes a sigh of relief. "That's fine. I'm, uh, it's the big grey building. The really ugly one. I'll be in there."

"Got it. See you shortly."

"Yeah, see you."

It's closer to ten when she finally sees headlights coming towards her. The parking lot is empty now, the few other night class students and professors having all trickled out by 9:30. She stands up from where she'd been sitting cross-legged on the damp, disgusting vestibule floor and steps outside.

"Hey," says Steve when she opens the passenger door. He looks her up and down. "You're soaking wet."

"I'm aware," she says shortly, dropping into the seat.

The drive is mostly silent, save for her directing Steve when to turn. She isn't trying to be sulky, or rude; it's just that this is humiliating, for no particularly good reason. Steve's her best friend. She knows he doesn't care. Still, she can't help but feel like a child, dripping all over his nice car while he drives her home from school.

Finally, after what feels like an excruciatingly long time, he pulls up in front of her house. "This it?"

"Yeah."

He's looking at it still, squinting a bit to see it through the dark and the rain. He's curious. He has every right to be. They've been friends for months now and he's never seen where she lives before. But she doesn't like it, feeling scrutinized like this by him. It's a little too intimate. It's a little too vulnerable.

There's a light on in the kitchen; her mom has waited up.

It hadn't even occurred to Robin to call home.

"Right. Uh, bye." She opens the passenger door, scoots out, and is about to slam it shut again before she hesitates. She ducks down, peering back into the car. "Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. Really."

He smiles at her—a genuine smile, not the usual teasing one. "No problem. Have a good night, Robs."

—

Robin isn't surprised anymore when Nancy and Jonathan come into Family Video. Usually their visits are short, just picking up a new movie or dropping an old one off—standard customer behavior, except for the chats that she's grown to expect and even look forward to.

Jonathan is funny, she's found, when he's not busy being shy. He's got a dry, deadpan sort of humor that keeps startling laughs out of her when she least expects it. She learns that he has two younger siblings, a sister as well as the brother he mentioned a while back, and she can see it in him easily, his being an older brother. There's something about him, a gentleness as well as a fierce protective streak that she senses she's only seen the very tip of, that almost makes her wish she'd had someone like him herself when she was growing up.

Nancy, she's learned, is a genius, or at least genius-adjacent. It's not that she's *told* Robin this; Robin wouldn't like her half so much if she had. But it's evident in everything Nancy says, in all of her mannerisms, how sharp she is. There's ambition there, too, more than Robin's ever had herself. Nancy is more driven than anyone else Robin knows. Sometimes, talking to her, she can't help but feel inadequate, almost guilty, like Nancy shouldn't be forced to waste her time talking to someone who's only taking night classes at the community college and isn't even doing particularly well in them.

But then Nancy will laugh, or flash Robin a quick, amused smile, and all Robin can think about is how she would do *anything* to make sure that Nancy comes back again.

So far, she always has.

It's a little baffling, Nancy and Jonathan's apparent attachment to Robin and Steve, but Robin tries not to look too closely at it. She doesn't really see anyone from high school anymore, and as much as she loves Steve, she's finding that she enjoys having more people her own age to talk to. Even if those people are just customers at her job. Even if they're dating each other and she can't get over her hopeless crush on one of them.

It's better than nothing.

It's late February now, weeks since Nancy and Jonathan first came. Robin is shelving returns while Steve peels old price tags off of VHS covers. Nancy and Jonathan are both leaning back against the counter, chatting idly with them while they work. Robin can't help but sneak glances at Nancy every now and then, just to savor the sight of her, perched casually against the counter as if she belongs there, as if she wants to be there. It's a slow day, peaceful and quiet and calm.

Then Nancy says, "We were wondering if you guys wanted to go out with us this Friday. Like, to a movie or something."

Robin freezes.

"Yeah, sure," says Steve easily, "that sounds like fun."

"Great," says Nancy, and then turns her devastating smile on Robin. "You in?"

"Uh—"

"Please?"

And—"Yeah, sure," she says automatically, and regrets it the moment it's left her mouth.

It isn't that she doesn't *want* to hang out with Nancy and Jonathan outside of Family Video. Steve is right; it does sound fine. But it also sounds like a commitment. Like something that's going to make this friendship a little more real, a little more permanent. It's going to make it harder to ignore the fact that she's in love with Jonathan's girlfriend.

But she *is* Jonathan's girlfriend, and she's just invited Steve and Robin to go out with them, *together*, to a *movie*, which is a classic date night activity, and that in itself presents a whole other problem.

The moment Nancy and Jonathan have left, she whirls to face Steve and hisses, "What were you *thinking*?"

Steve looks at her blankly. "What do you mean?"

"You're an idiot. They obviously meant it to be, like, a double date or something."

"So what?" He raises an eyebrow at her.

"So, we're not dating, dingus."

"Again: so what?"

For one terrifying instant, she wonders if this was what Steve wanted all along—a sneaky way to score a date with her. Her stomach fills with dread as she imagines having to turn him down, having to explain *why* she's turning him down, and then losing her best friend, because surely he wouldn't still want to hang out with her if—but then she sees the way he's smirking at her, and shakes herself. Of course that's not what Steve wants. He's messing with her, like he always is. She breathes a sigh of relief that she hopes is imperceptible.

And maybe it's better this way, she thinks. A double date. She can work with that. She doesn't entirely trust herself not to give her crush away the moment she sees Nancy outside of work. It would be nice to have an alibi.

And what better alibi than pretending to date Steve?

—

Robin's never seen any of the kids come in alone before, but this time it's just Max. She's got her skateboard tucked under her arm, dressed—as she always is—in just her thin green hoodie, entirely inadequate for the tail end of an Indiana winter.

Steve greets her first. “Hey, Mad Max.”

She smiles briefly at the nickname. It doesn't quite reach her eyes. She approaches the counter almost hesitantly.

“You okay?” asks Robin.

“Yeah, of course,” says Max, a little too quickly. She shuffles awkwardly from one foot to the other, and there's an uncomfortable beat of silence. Robin glances at Steve, who opens his mouth to speak, but Max beats him to it.

“Robin? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, kiddo, what's up?”

She glances nervously at Steve. “Uh.”

Now Robin's starting to get genuinely worried. Max *loves* Steve, seems to hero-worship him almost as much as Dustin does. But she doesn't comment on it. Instead she just says, “Let's go to the back. This dingus can handle running the counter by himself for a few minutes.”

Steve's an idiot, but he's smart enough and knows all the kids well enough to be well aware that something is up with Max. So all he says is, “Yeah, of course.” Then he seems to realize that he sounds entirely too genuine, and adds, “This is coming out of your lunch break, though, Buckley.”

“Fuck off,” says Robin lightly, and leads Max into the back room.

She shuts the door firmly behind them and then sits down on the overturned crate that she and Steve use as a seat, leaving the one actual chair open for Max. Max sits slowly, almost gingerly, not at all

like her usual swaggering self. She looks a bit queasy.

Robin waits. When Max fails to say anything, she prompts her gently: "What's going on, Max?"

"I, uh." She swallows hard, crosses her arms defensively in front of her chest. "I—I know I'm not really your—your friend, but I just—"

"Don't be silly," interrupts Robin. "Of course you're my friend."

She'd hoped that would put Max's mind at ease, but if anything, she seems close to tears now. "I, thanks, I guess. I, um. I just, I wasn't sure who else to talk to, and I thought maybe—I just needed to—"

Her voice breaks. Robin is overwhelmed, suddenly, by how very, very young she looks. She resists the urge to hug her; she has no idea how Max would take that. Instead she just says, "It's okay. Take your time."

"I really like El," Max blurts out.

"Oh," says Robin, and then, after a moment, " *Oh.* "

"Yeah," whispers Max. A single tear slips out and she scrubs it away furiously. "I'm so sorry, I don't know why I decided to tell you, I just, it was driving me *insane* keeping it to myself and you just, you seem really cool and so I just thought—I hoped—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I know you probably hate me now, I'll just—"

She's half-risen from her chair, reaching to pick up her skateboard, when Robin stops her with a hand on her arm. "Max. Hey." She waits until Max has stopped actively trying to leave before she continues. "I don't hate you," she says softly. "Are you kidding? I actually—"

She's a little choked up herself, actually, but for Max's sake she tries not to show it.

"I feel really honored that you trusted me enough to tell me. And I also..."

"Also what?" Max prompts when Robin trails off. Her voice is wavering, small.

The words are *right there*. It would be so easy. Max obviously wouldn't care—she'd be delighted, actually, to know that Robin is like her. But the words stick in her throat. *Coward*, she berates herself, *coward*, *coward*, because she's older than Max, and yet clearly not as brave. She tries to tell herself that maybe it's *because* she's older that this is so hard, that she's seen more of the world's cruelties and that's why she's more afraid, but she knows that isn't the truth. The truth is just that she'll never be as much of a badass as Max.

She's okay with that.

"I also am really glad that we're friends. You are very, very cool, Mad Max."

When they emerge from the back room some time later, Max has obviously been crying, but she's grinning. She looks genuinely happy, lighter than she has in ages. Steve doesn't say anything in front of her, clearly not wanting to embarrass her—Robin's heart swells with fondness for him in that moment—but as soon as she's gone he asks Robin what that was all about.

"Oh, nothing," says Robin, unable to quite suppress a smile. "Just girl talk."

—

It's a testament to how much Steve apparently likes Nancy that he doesn't even complain about the movie she and Jonathan picked for them to go see. If Robin had forced him to watch something like *The Purple Rose of Cairo* on one of their movie nights at his place, he would have whined all the way through it—good-naturedly, of course, and without any real bite behind it, but still. It's really not his kind of movie.

But he's smiling as the four of them leave the theater, talking animatedly about his favorite parts, giving no hint of having been bored to tears. Perhaps, Robin thinks as he reenacts a scene to the delighted laughter of Nancy and Jonathan, she's a little too hard on him about his incredibly pedestrian movie taste. Or maybe he's just a really good actor when he's in love.

She shakes that thought from her head. She's being dramatic. Steve isn't *in love* with Nancy.

But his crush is incredibly obvious, and she tries not to think about it too hard. She hopes that she, at least, is being a little bit more subtle.

"So—dinner?" says Nancy. They've reached Steve's car; Jonathan's is a little farther off still. Nancy's hands are shoved deep in her pockets, her shoulders hunched against the chill, and she's bouncing up and down a bit on her toes. If Robin were Jonathan, she thinks, she would be holding Nancy's hands to keep them warm.

"Yeah, sure," says Steve, "what did you have in mind?"

"I'm up for anything," says Jonathan unhelpfully.

Nancy glances at Robin, who shrugs. She's up for anything too. "Benny's?" Nancy suggests. "It's pretty close."

"Sounds good to me."

"Great. We'll meet you guys there."

They end up crowded into a tiny corner booth that Robin's pretty sure isn't meant to accommodate more than two, she and Steve on one side and Nancy and Jonathan on the other. Benny's isn't a romantic restaurant—not by a long shot—but squeezed together like this, pressed shoulder to hip against Steve and her knees knocking into Nancy's under the table, it feels intimate.

For the first time all night, she remembers that she and Steve are supposed to be dating.

She can't help but feel a little guilty about that. Neither of them have lied, not really; they never told Nancy and Jonathan that they *were* together. But if it hadn't been clear before that that was their assumption, it certainly is now. It would be hard to look like anything *but* a couple, squeezed together like this.

She wonders if Nancy and Jonathan are holding hands under the table. The thought makes her heart squeeze up with a jealousy that

she tries quickly to suppress.

It occurs to her that this would all be so much easier if she could just hate Jonathan.

She doesn't hate Jonathan, though. In fact, she quite likes him.

"Oh, I've been meaning to ask, Robin," Nancy says, a few minutes into dinner, "what classes are you taking? You mentioned that one time that you're in school but I don't think I ever asked what you're studying."

It's her least favorite question, but that Nancy had thought to ask it makes her chest glow with a ridiculous warmth. "Right now I'm taking a French lit class and a couple English classes," she says. "I'm, uh. Hoping to get degrees in English and French."

She doesn't mention that the actual degree part is a long way off. The community college doesn't even offer enough French for a whole degree; she's already taking one of the few advanced classes that exist there. And she'll still have to transfer to a four-year university if she wants to get anything more than an associate's, which she does. She doesn't want to think about how many hours at Family Video it'll take to make that happen.

"That's incredible," says Nancy. She's smiling, sounds genuine. "I was never any good at languages. That's Jonathan's domain."

"Really? I didn't know you could speak any other languages."

"I can't, really," says Jonathan. His shoulders have started to creep up towards his ears the way Robin has noticed they do whenever he's embarrassed. "I just got good grades in high school Spanish, is all. That's not hard to do."

"Well," says Steve, "I certainly didn't get good grades in high school Spanish," and Jonathan flushes slightly.

"Too busy flirting with whoever was sitting in front of you?" teases Robin.

Steve winks dramatically. "Damn right." Nancy laughs.

The conversation flows easily from there. Jonathan and Robin gang up on Nancy and Steve, making fun of their horrendous music taste —“God, will you let the ABBA thing go already!”—and Nancy and Steve, in return, rejoice in realizing that Jonathan and Robin were both pretentious loners who would absolutely have been friends had they known each other in high school.

(“But they couldn’t have been friends,” Steve points out, “that’s not how being a loner works.”

“I had friends!” Robin protests.

“Jonathan didn’t,” says Nancy, laughing when Jonathan hits her lightly.)

It comes as a shock when the girl working the counter approaches their table and says, “Sorry, we’re getting ready to close up.”

Robin looks around, startled to find that they’re the only people left in the restaurant. She glances at her watch for the first time all evening. They’ve been here for *hours*. When she meets Steve’s eyes, she finds the same surprise mirrored there.

She leaves a bigger tip than she can afford.

Outside, it’s begun to rain. Just a gentle mist. It catches the glow of the streetlights, casting soft halos around them. The lights from Benny’s reflect in the damp pavement.

Robin is happy.

When they part ways at Jonathan’s car, Nancy surprises her with a hug. It’s quick, casual, over before Robin even has time to react. Then Nancy is climbing into the passenger seat, saying she’ll see them soon, and Steve is waving, and Jonathan is driving away.

She must be imagining it, but all the way home, she thinks she can still feel Nancy’s warm, slender arms around her, can still smell her perfume on her clothes.

—

On an unseasonably warm day in the middle of March, Robin receives her first birthday party invitation since the seventh grade.

“We’re turning fourteen,” El informs her with the pride and excitement of a much younger child. “Next Saturday.”

“What’s this about next Saturday?” asks Steve, shouldering his way through the door to the back room with a box of tapes in his arms. “You guys making plans without me?”

“Yes,” says Mike, deadpan.

“ No, ” says El. “You are invited too.”

“Invited where?”

“It’s our birthday next week,” Will explains. “We’re having a party and we were wondering if you guys wanted to come.”

She’d never admit it out loud, but it’s kind of sweet, really, to know that the kids really do see her and Steve as friends, or at least as *something*—older siblings, maybe, or a cool young aunt and uncle. Still, she’s a little hesitant. It’s not as if she’s ever hung out with them outside of the video store. “Are you sure?” she asks. “I mean—”

“Please?” says El. And, fuck, there it is—that pleading puppy-dog look that’s impossible to say no to. When Robin glances at Will, he has the same expression on his face. Mike—he’s the only other one of the kids that’s here today—is scowling, like he usually is, but Robin knows him well enough by now to read the specifics of what this particular scowl means: *You’d better give Will and El what they want or there’ll be hell to pay.*

“We won’t be, like, intruding?” she asks. “I mean, if it’s just supposed to be, like, your family and friends—”

“ *You’re* our friends,” says El stubbornly.

“And our brother will be there,” adds Will, “and he’s around your guys’ age. And probably Mike’s sister, too. So you’ll have other *young adults* to hang out with, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

"I bet your brother isn't anywhere near as cool as you guys," says Steve.

"He isn't," says El. "But you'll come?"

Robin looks at Steve. It's unspoken between them: the *I'm in if you are*. He shrugs, looking indifferent, though Robin knows he probably feels just as stupidly honored as she does.

She turns back to the kids. "Sure," she says. "We'll be there."

—

"What do ten-year-olds even *like*?" groans Steve.

"Fourteen." Robin slides over a couple of hangers on the rack. "And I have no idea."

"What did you like when you were fourteen?"

She pulls out a t-shirt, glances at it, grimaces. Then another. She's beginning to doubt they're going to have any luck here. "I don't know. Soccer, I guess? Band?"

"Nerd. This?"

Robin looks at the shirt he's holding up. It isn't ugly—it's kind of nice, actually—but it doesn't seem right. "We aren't their parents. We probably shouldn't be trying to get them clothes."

"This is a clothes store! *You* suggested we come here!"

"I panicked!"

"Can I help you guys?"

It's the older woman who had been at the register when they came in. She'd looked vaguely skeptical of them then—now she looks downright irritated.

"We were just leaving," says Robin.

Outside the store, she slumps dejectedly into Steve's passenger seat.

"This is hopeless," she mutters as he turns the key in the ignition.

"Come on. It shouldn't be this hard. What do we know they like?"

"Uh. Movies?"

Really, she's not even sure they *do* like movies that much. Not more than any other kids, anyway. Most of the time, when they're at Family Video, they don't even rent anything. The main movies she hears them talking about are—

"Wait," she says to Steve, so excitedly that he instinctively hits the brakes and then glares at her, annoyed. "Don't look at me like that. I have an idea."

—

It's stupid, how nervous Robin is as she walks up the front steps to Will and El's house.

It's a pretty nice house. Not big by any means or particularly new-looking, but from the outside it looks well-kept and homey. There's a few pots that she imagines are filled with flowers during the summer, and a bench on the front porch with a worn cushion, and a tire swing hanging from a nearby tree. The house itself is dwarfed by the property—it's in the middle of nowhere, practically—and she imagines that Will and El must have had a good childhood here, running around the giant yard together, exploring the woods that creep up on the edges. Those same woods have a slightly green tinge to them, Robin realizes, a faint indication of early-spring buds just starting to grow. It's the first time she's noticed it this year.

"Ready?" Steve asks, his hand raised to the front door in preparation to knock. He's a little nervous too, she knows, though she doesn't think anyone but her would be able to tell.

She shifts the messily-wrapped bundle from one arm to the other. "Yeah."

It isn't El or Will who opens the door, or any of the other kids, but a tiny frazzled-looking woman with messy bangs and a huge smile. "Hi!" she says. "Hi, hi, you must be—Steve, right? And Robin?"

“Yeah, that’s us,” says Steve, extending his hand. The woman—El and Will’s mom, Robin assumes—shakes it, and Robin almost laughs at how small her hand is in Steve’s. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you,” echoes Robin.

“You too. I’m—”

“Steve!” shouts El. She comes skidding into view from behind her mom. “Robin!”

“Hey, kiddo,” says Robin, grinning at her. She looks adorable, wearing a gigantic flannel shirt as she always does but this time over a colorful dress instead of a t-shirt and jeans. The outfit clashes horribly and Robin absolutely loves it. “Happy birthday.”

“Thank you!”

She’s as tall as her mom, somehow, even though she’s by far the smallest of the kids. As Robin watches, her mom wraps an arm around her shoulders and kisses the side of her head. “Why don’t you show them in, sweetie,” she says. “Your dad and brother should be back any minute.”

They must have another brother, Robin realizes as El pulls her by the hand past Joyce and into the living room; Will is already there, sitting cross-legged on the floor, gathered around a game board with Max and Lucas and Dustin. He looks up when Steve and Robin enter with El. “You made it!”

“Of course,” says Steve. He dumps the gift he’s holding onto the coffee table, where there’s already a small pile. Robin does the same. “Happy birthday, bud.”

“Thanks.”

“Mike is late,” El informs the room at large. She says it without judgment; she’s just stating a fact.

“Oh—he radioed a few minutes ago,” says Will. “He said they’re on the way.”

As if on cue, the front door opens again. Robin turns, expecting to see Mike, ready for him to make some disparaging remark he doesn't mean about her and Steve being here. Instead it's a tall, burly man with a beard coming through the door.

"Got the cake," he says, holding up the white box as if to prove it, but whatever the response is from the kids Robin doesn't hear it.

Jonathan has entered behind him.

For a moment she wonders if she's having a stroke. It's always jarring, seeing someone you know in a place you don't expect. Her confusion isn't lessened by the mirroring look of shock on Jonathan's face as he spots her and Steve.

"Hey, Robs," says Steve, not having noticed yet, "do you—" He stops as he catches sight of Jonathan, whose eyebrows have now disappeared into his hairline.

If the kids have noticed anything unusual, they haven't let on; they've all followed the man into the kitchen without a second glance at Steve and Robin and Jonathan, who find themselves suddenly alone in the living room.

"Uh," says Jonathan after a long beat of silence. "What are you doing here?" The way he says it is rude, almost accusing, though his face doesn't betray any anger. He just seems bewildered.

"Will and El invited us," says Steve. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I—how do you know my siblings?"

"Your *siblings*? "

Before Jonathan has time to answer, the front door is opening again. It is Mike this time, already grumbling about something.

And Nancy is with him.

Robin starts to laugh.

Nancy had been looking down, fiddling with something in her purse,

but now her eyes snap up. “*Robin?* ”

“Nancy?” says Steve.

“Steve! I—Jonathan— *what ?*”

She shuts the door behind her, comes to stand next to Jonathan. She looks as baffled as he does.

“What are you *doing* here?”

“Will and El invited them, apparently.”

“What? How do you know Will and El?”

“We—”

Mike returns to the living room then. “Nancy, I need your keys,” he says, “I left the presents in the car,” and then Robin realizes.

“Oh, my god,” she says. She starts laughing again. “Mike’s your brother, isn’t he?”

“Yes?”

“Oh, my god,” Robin says again, “we’re so stupid.”

“Hey, don’t include me in this,” says Steve, and then to Nancy and Jonathan, “The kids all hang out at the store, like, all the time.”

“So you’re—what, like, friends with them?” asks Jonathan.

Robin and Steve glance at each other, then shrug. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Don’t ask how it happened,” adds Robin. “We don’t understand it any more than you do.”

“But how did we not *know?* ” Jonathan’s voice is rising a bit. “I talk about El and Will all the time!”

“Not by name!”

“Why would I—”

“Hey!” It’s Jonathan’s dad, poking his head out from the kitchen. “Do you guys want cake or what?”

“Yeah, we’re coming, Hop,” says Jonathan.

Robin barely has time to wonder what “Hop” means—is it some weird variation on “pops,” or the man’s name, maybe, if he’s actually Jonathan’s stepdad?—before it’s driven from her mind by the absolute chaos she finds upon following Steve and Nancy and Jonathan into the kitchen. The kids aren’t arguing, for once, but they’re all talking loudly in what Robin thinks must be at least four separate conversations that they are somehow all participating in simultaneously.

“Jonathan!” calls the woman who had greeted them at the door—this must be Joyce Byers, Robin realizes, surprised to find that she remembers the name Steve had read from the Family Video card well over a month ago. “Come help me with the plates, will you?”

Jonathan edges his way through the crowded kitchen to meet her at the counter. A moment later, they’re distributing paper plates together.

She’s watching this happen when a throat is cleared beside her, gruff and authoritative-sounding. She turns to find Jonathan’s dad looking at her. “I don’t think we’ve met,” he says.

“Oh,” she says, “uh—I’m Robin. I’m a friend of Jonathan’s.” It seems like the least complicated explanation for what she’s doing in this man’s kitchen.

He gives her an appraising look, then turns his eyes to Steve, who introduces himself as well. There’s something intimidating about him, almost off-putting, though he seems nice enough. Robin gets the sense that, if she were to cross him, he would track her down in an instant.

“Jim Hopper,” he says.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Hopper.”

He almost smiles. “Just Hopper. Or Hop. Nice to meet you too.”

Robin is spared having to decide whether she’s supposed to say anything else by Mrs. Byers calling him to find the candles as she sets the cake down on the kitchen table.

The cake is gigantic, and pretty, covered in a tangle of icing flowers with HAPPY BIRTHDAY WILL + EL written in yellow. But what Robin’s eyes are most drawn to as Hopper lights the absurd number of candles—twenty-eight, she supposes, fourteen for each of them—is El’s face. She looks absolutely ecstatic. She’s grinning wildly, her eyes wide and bright, and Robin doesn’t know where El’s childlike wonder comes from but she hopes it never goes away.

Then she notices Max’s expression, almost unbearably tender as she watches El, and she can’t help the soft laugh that escapes her.

Steve hears it and glances at her, a questioning look in his face. “Nothing,” she whispers to him, still smiling slightly.

The party passes in a blur, for the most part, and Robin can’t imagine what she had been so nervous about. There’s not much opportunity to talk to Nancy and Jonathan, absorbed as they all are in the kids’ antics and the general festivity. Robin is hardly able to get a word in edgewise even to Steve until they’re sitting together on the living room floor towards the end of the afternoon, watching El and Will open presents.

“How did we not *know* this?” she asks him quietly. “How did *they* not know? Did Will and El just not tell Jonathan about their new friends Steve and Robin from the video store?”

Steve shrugs. “I guess not. Mike, too. Not sure how the kids and Nancy and Jonathan managed to never run into each other, though. They’re there *constantly* .”

Robin is distracted from answering, realizing El and Will have just picked up the gifts from her and Steve. She nudges him, gesturing to pay attention. She’s anxious, suddenly, and has to fight the urge to jump up and snatch the gifts from the kids’ hands. *No, no, don’t open those*, she wants to say, *they’re terrible, we’ll get you something better*.

She doesn't do it, of course. She just sits in petrified silence and watches El and Will tear the wrapping paper off.

There's a brief, agonizing silence before El realizes what it is and lets out an exclamation of excitement. She holds up her purple lightsaber, showing it off, and then catches sight of Will's blue one and her face somehow lights up even more. "Like Luke and Leia! Dad, look!"

"I see them, kid," says Hopper, smiling.

Will grins too. Robin knows he must know as well as she herself does that Leia doesn't have a lightsaber, but he doesn't correct his sister. "Thank you guys," he says to Robin and Steve, sounding sincere. "Did you make these?"

"Yeah. Well, Robin did."

"Oh, come on," says Robin. "You...helped."

"I don't think he helped," says Max in a loud whisper. El giggles at that. Max turns red, and redder still when she accidentally catches Robin's eye to find her smiling. *Shut up*, she mouths across the room.

Adorable, Robin mouths back.

It's not until later, just when Robin and Steve are about to excuse themselves and head home, that Nancy and Jonathan corner them in the kitchen. The kids are all occupied with whatever game they're playing and Hopper and Mrs. Byers have retreated to the backyard, probably trying to escape all the noise. Robin is picking up paper plates from the table and Steve is leaning against the counter, watching her.

"You don't have to do that," says Jonathan, startling her.

"I know," she says. She picks up another plate anyway. "I wanted to make myself useful."

"You're a party guest. You aren't *supposed* to be useful."

"Give it up, man," says Steve, rolling his eyes. "I already tried. It's no use."

"I can't help it if I was raised with *manners*, Harrington."

Nancy smiles at that, but her face quickly turns serious again. "We wanted to talk more about how you know the kids," she says rather bluntly.

Robin drops the stack of plates into the trash. "Okay? Like we said, they come into the store all the time."

"Usually when they're waiting for a ride after they're at the arcade next door, I think," adds Steve.

Jonathan looks unimpressed by this answer, and also a little nervous, like he's trying to be confrontational but isn't quite sure how. "Why did they never mention you, though?"

"What do you mean?" asks Steve, but Robin, with a sinking feeling, thinks she knows where this is going.

She doesn't blame Jonathan and Nancy for being suspicious. Jonathan, especially; she knows how protective he is of his brother and sister. She has no experience herself with younger siblings, but she thinks that she would probably also be a little wary if they suddenly developed an unexplainable relationship with a couple of adults and then hid it from their family.

"I don't know why they never mentioned us," she says honestly. She's as confused as they are about how she and Steve ended up at this birthday party without either Jonathan or Nancy knowing about it. She's trying to sort out the words to explain the nature of her relationship with Nancy and Jonathan's siblings—the phrases *camp counselor* and *friend* and *cool young aunt* all cross her mind—when she's interrupted by a voice from the doorway.

"I promise they aren't creeps."

It's Will. The rest of the kids are all standing around him, their expressions ranging from slightly guilty to extremely smug.

"That's reassuring," says Jonathan drily.

Nancy looks at her brother. "Did you know we knew them too?"

"We've known forever," says Dustin, answering for him.

"We kept it a secret on purpose," Lucas chimes in.

"We may have asked you for more rides to and from the arcade than we really needed," says Mike.

"But *why*? "

"We realized you always go into the video store when you're already there anyway," says Max.

"Again: *why*? "

It's El who answers, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"We think you should date," she says.

There's a long silence.

Then Dustin starts laughing, and it quickly sets the rest of the kids off too. Without a few seconds they're all doubled over, gasping for breath, grabbing onto each other for support.

Robin glances at Steve, then at Nancy and Jonathan. They all look just as bewildered as she feels.

Then—"But you two are already together," Jonathan and Robin say at the same time.

"What? No we aren't," say Nancy and Steve.

Robin blinks.

The four of them stare at each other, stunned into silence. Finally Mike breaks it. "You thought Jonathan was dating my *sister*? "

"Well, they did *used* to date, to be fair," says Dustin.

"Yeah, but that was years ago!"

"Wait, wait, wait," says Steve, "let me get this straight. You two aren't a couple?"

“No,” says Nancy, “we’re not. I mean, we used to be, but—no.”

Jonathan looks to Robin. “And you aren’t dating Steve?”

“God, no,” she laughs. “This dingus? Absolutely not.”

Steve wrinkles his nose. “And you really thought Robin was my girlfriend?” He rolls his eyes at Robin. “We’d be the worst couple ever.”

“But you guys seem so close!”

“Yeah, I mean, so do you two.”

“You guys obviously like each other,” says Will. “You hang out all the time.”

“Yeah, because we’re *friends*, bud,” says Jonathan.

Then Nancy says calmly, without even turning to look at her brother, “Mike, I’m going to kill you.”

It had been funny while it was happening, but by the time Robin gets home, she’s a nervous wreck.

There’s a tiny, tiny part of her that’s relieved to know Nancy isn’t actually dating Jonathan. *Maybe*, says the small, traitorous voice in her head, *maybe that means you have a chance*. But of course she doesn’t have a chance. This doesn’t change anything. Really, it just makes everything harder.

The kids think she should date Jonathan. It’s a ridiculous idea, laughable even to think about, but for the first time she considers what it must look like from the outside. Nobody knows she’s a lesbian. And she *is* good friends with Jonathan. She’s open around him, unguarded. He makes her laugh. And she makes him laugh, too.

Oh, god, she realizes with a sinking feeling. What if Jonathan likes her? It hadn’t ever occurred to her before, when she just assumed he was head-over-heels in love with Nancy, but she can see now how it

might look like she's been leading him on. And if he *does* like her then she'll have to reject him without explaining why, which will ruin their friendship, or she'll have to tell him that she's gay, which will *definitely* ruin their friendship. She thinks fleetingly of Max; even she hasn't told anyone else yet, and it's already been established that she's the brave one of the two of them. All the kids will be understanding when Max tells them, she thinks. They're just kids; they aren't old enough yet for whatever prejudices they might have to really be cemented.

But Jonathan isn't a kid. And if she tells Jonathan, and he tells Nancy and Nancy tells Steve...

She likes having friends. She isn't ready to lose them.

She prays it doesn't come to that.

—

It's another week before she sees Nancy and Jonathan again.

They come into the video store early on a Tuesday, when there aren't any other customers. They don't even pretend that they're there to return an old movie or rent a new one; they just head straight for the counter and Nancy says without preamble, "I'm sorry about the kids. That was out of line."

"It's okay," Robin says automatically.

"No, it was awkward," says Jonathan, and she has to laugh, because it *had* been awkward. It still is.

"Scheming little assholes," Nancy says, and then looks apologetically at Jonathan. "Well, maybe not Will and El."

"Oh, they're definitely complicit in this too." He shakes his head, looking both annoyed and helplessly fond. "Seriously, though. I'm sorry about them."

He does sound sorry, genuinely, and Robin tries not to make it obvious how relieved she feels. He wouldn't be so sorry if he really did want to be more than friends. And besides, who was she kidding,

thinking Jonathan might be into her? That was stupid, conceited. Of course they're just friends.

Thank god, she thinks.

"Really, don't worry about it," says Steve.

Then Nancy says, sounding a little hesitant, "We'd still really like to be friends with you guys. I mean, if that's—I hope they didn't make things weird, saying all that stuff about us dating."

It's Nancy that Robin feels less certain about. She likes Nancy and Jonathan a lot, likes hanging out with them even despite her unbearable crush. But something's changed now that she knows Nancy is single. With one less barrier between them, she can't stop her ridiculous heart from hoping, and there's a part of her that never wants to see Nancy again. Without the buffer of a boyfriend, she's terrified that she'll be unable to stop herself falling for Nancy even more than she already has.

But the stronger part wants to keep Nancy in her life at all costs, no matter how much it hurts. She isn't sure whether that's maturity or masochism or just plain stupid. Either way, she finds herself saying, "Yeah, of course. We can definitely still be friends."

It makes her chest ache, but it's worth it for Nancy's smile.

—

She isn't sure exactly *why* her hands are shaking; she only knows that she can't get them to stop.

Robin's no stranger to anxiety, but it's been a long time since it was this bad. They had been a frequent occurrence in high school, these waves of trembling and dread, and more than once she'd ended up hiding in the school bathroom trying and often failing not to hyperventilate. But it's been months now since the last time that happened. She'd thought this part of her life was behind her.

Apparently, she had been wrong.

Steve doesn't seem to have noticed, at least. She intends to keep it

that way. He'll only worry if he realizes anything is wrong, and he'll try to help, and it'll be sweet of him but won't make anything better. It'll just be humiliating. She trusts Steve, she really does, but she doesn't want him to see her like that. Especially when she doesn't have any idea what's causing it.

You know what's causing it, says a little voice in the back of her head. She tries to ignore it. Better not think about that, not right now, not when she's at work with Steve. Better not think about how she's been lying to him, and lying to Jonathan and Nancy too, and how she can't *ever* tell them her secret, because then—

This isn't helping.

She takes a deep breath and returns to scraping off old price tags, perhaps a little more vigorously than necessary. *I'm fine*, she tells herself, *I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine* —

"Robin?"

She startles, not having noticed Steve coming out from the back room to stand beside her at the counter. "*Jesus*," she hisses, and then squeezes her eyes shut for a couple seconds, trying to calm her pounding heart. "Don't *do* that."

"Do what?"

She doesn't bother with an answer, just picks the tape back up and continues to pick at the old sticker with her fingernails. Her hands are shaking more than they had been before.

"*Robin*. What's going on with you?"

"I'm fine," she says shortly.

"No, you aren't." Then there's a hand on her arm, stopping her frantic scraping. She tries to flinch away but Steve holds her still. "Dude," he says, concern edging into his voice, "your hands are shaking."

"No they aren't."

"Yes they *are*. What's going on?"

She makes another attempt at pulling away, and this time is successful. "I'm *fine*, Steve!"

She can feel her chest tightening, can feel a lump building in her throat. She needs to get out of here, away from him. This can't happen, not in front of Steve. It's too embarrassing. And she's afraid of what she might say.

Is this how Max felt? she wonders fleetingly, but the thought only makes her feel worse because Max had been brave, so brave, and here she is, still a coward, and she needs to get away from Steve *right now*.

"Robs—" he starts, but she's already running for the back room. She slams the door behind her. If Steve finishes that sentence, she doesn't hear it.

She drops into the folding chair, burying her face in her hands, but then quickly jumps back up. It's worse, sitting still. It makes her feel trapped, immobilized. Instead she paces, her hands balled into fists, trying to inhale and exhale in steady, measured breaths.

Idiot, she berates herself.

The door opens.

Of course Steve has followed her back here, and she wants to scream in frustration. Of course he can't just leave her alone. This is his fault, really, all of it. If he hadn't been so *nice* to her and so *funny* and so *friendly* they would never have ended up friends and she wouldn't be in this position. And if it weren't for his stupid, unconscious charm then Nancy would never have come back after that first time and Robin wouldn't have to deal with being in love with her.

And she wouldn't have to watch her fall in love with Steve.

It's obvious, now, that that's what's happening. There's no other explanation. Why else would she keep returning to Family Video over and over, smiling and chatting and flirting? Why else would she be so determined to become Robin's friend? Trying to make a good impression on Steve is the only reason someone like Nancy Wheeler

would hang around with someone like Robin, an under-employed high school graduate who still lives at home and has no real future.

She's dimly aware that Steve is saying something, but she doesn't really register it until she feels his hand on her shoulder. "Robin," he says, "you're freaking me out." He doesn't sound accusatory, though, or judgmental. Just gentle.

He's so gentle.

Robin starts to cry.

"Shit," mutters Steve, and then he's wrapping his arms around her, and in spite of herself Robin finds herself leaning into him and burying her face against his shoulder.

He doesn't say anything else for a long while, just holds her while she cries, and she's grateful. This is humiliating enough already; she doesn't think she could stand having to explain herself to him. *I was thinking too much and then I started to panic.* It sounds stupid even in her head. Already, even as she's still crying into Steve's shirt, she dreads having to face him afterwards. It's that, as much as the warm comfort he's providing, that keeps her from straightening back up even after she's cried herself out.

Eventually he pats her back, a little awkwardly. "Do you, uh. Want to talk about anything?"

She finally pulls away, wiping at her eyes with her sleeve, and lets out a shaky, embarrassed laugh. She'd be lying if she said she felt entirely better—the anxiety is still there, bubbling just under the surface, and now it's paired with a deep feeling of shame. But she does feel just a little bit lighter, somehow. "I'm okay," she says, and then forces herself to meet his eyes. He looks worried, confused. She tries for a smile. "I promise."

"Okay," he says, sounding unconvinced. He still hasn't dropped his hand from her arm. She finds that she doesn't mind the touch—it's grounding, calming. She isn't used to that. She isn't used to anyone being around when she's like this. "Did...did something happen?"

She shakes her head. "I just...it just happens, sometimes." It's not quite a lie. She wipes at her face again. "I really am fine."

"Okay," he says again. He gives her a very serious look, almost searching. "You know you can talk to me, right? If something did happen?"

Her smile is more real this time, though his words also make her feel as if she's on the verge of tears again. "I know," she says. She can't talk to him about the issue that's causing *this*, but she appreciates it all the same. "I...thank you, Steve."

"Of course," he says softly. "Is there anything I can do? Do you need anything?"

"Could you just...watch the store for me? I just, I need a minute, I think."

"Yeah, course." He rubs his hand up and down her arm and then finally lets her go. "Take as long as you need."

She has to choke back another sob as soon as he's left the room, and a few more tears slip out, but now it's from relief more than anything else. She sinks back into the chair, exhausted suddenly.

She can see why Nancy likes him.

And god, what kind of friend does this make her, to be so bitter about that? She loves Steve. She should want him happy.

She *does* want him happy.

And it's not as if she and Steve are rivals in this, not really. Nancy Wheeler, of all people, isn't queer. Robin doesn't have a chance with her anyway. But Steve does. And though she herself is never going to get a happy ending with Nancy, there's no reason why Steve shouldn't.

He's a good friend, a great friend. And it's about time, she thinks, that she returned the favor.

She's going to make sure Steve and Nancy end up together if it's the

last thing she does.

—

The opportunity to play matchmaker comes sooner than she expects it to.

“Oh, I meant to ask,” says Nancy suddenly, after she and Jonathan have already been hanging around the video store for close to fifteen minutes. “Do you guys want to come to this thing on campus with me on Friday? The improv group is doing a show—I’m not sure what it is exactly—but it should be fun, I think. I can get you student tickets.” Robin is about to enthusiastically agree when Nancy adds, “I have a friend in it and I promised I’d go but Jonathan can’t make it and I don’t want to go alone.”

“You mean Jonathan has *other plans*? ” says Steve with mock incredulity. “Rude.”

“My mom and Hop are going out of town for the night and I already agreed to be home with the kids.” Jonathan makes a face as he says this, as if tasting something unpleasant, and Robin laughs.

“They just turned fourteen,” says Steve, “can’t they be home alone for a couple hours?”

Jonathan shrugs. “My parents are kind of protective. But please go with Nance, she’ll never let me hear the end of it if she doesn’t have anyone to go with.”

“Oh, don’t be dramatic.”

“You told me, and I quote, ‘Robin and Steve had better be free or I will never forgive you.’”

Nancy looks like she’s going to protest, but Steve cuts her off, laughing. “I’ll go,” he says. “Only for Jonathan’s sake, though. I don’t want anyone thinking I actually enjoy *college improv*. ”

Nancy rolls her eyes. “Whatever, King Steve.”

So it could just be the two of them, if Robin declines. This, she

realizes, might be her best chance. "I'm busy too, actually," she says before she can change her mind. "Something for class."

Steve raises his eyebrows at her. "On a Friday night?" he asks skeptically.

"Yeah."

He frowns at her, as if he thinks she's lying but doesn't know how to prove it. Eventually he just shrugs and turns back to Nancy. "Well, I guess it's just us, then."

Robin feels a little bad for lying, but it's overwhelmed by the bittersweet satisfaction of having just set Steve and Nancy up on something like a date.

"How was your date?" Robin asks as soon as Steve comes in on Saturday morning.

"It wasn't a date," says Steve. He dumps his bag on the counter and then slumps against it, already looking bored even though he's been at work for all of fifteen seconds.

"No?"

"No. We just hung out. As *friends*, Robs."

"If you say so," says Robin in a slightly sing-song voice, more to provoke the annoyed glare she knows Steve will shoot at her than anything else.

He groans dramatically. "Are you siding with the kids on this now?"

"Maybe."

"Nancy isn't my type," he tells her. It's a feeble excuse, and Robin smirks.

"Why, because she's literate?"

“Fuck you.”

She raises an eyebrow at him, cocks her head playfully. “If you insist.”

—

The next time the kids show up, Steve says pointedly to El and Will, “I hope you had a good Friday night.”

“We did,” says El calmly, and then wanders off with Mike to look at the new releases display. Will asks Steve what he means.

“It’s come to my attention that Jonathan couldn’t hang out with *me* because he was too busy hanging out with *you*. ”

“Oh,” says Will, smiling slightly, “yeah, sorry. He was pretty pissed about that too. I told my mom and Hop we’d be fine on our own but they *still* think we need a babysitter.”

“That’s lame,” says Steve.

Robin smiles to herself at the thought of Jonathan storming grumpily around the house, whining about having to watch his siblings instead of going out with his friends. It seems out of character, and yet she can picture it perfectly. “He told you that? That he was pissed?”

“Not exactly. He just made that face he always does when he’s sad about something stupid.”

“Excuse me,” says Steve, “you think hanging out with me and Robin is *stupid*? ”

“Yes,” says Will, without betraying a trace of irony.

Then Steve is bickering good-naturedly with him, and with the other kids when they wander back over to the counter to see what all the fuss is about. Robin’s half-listening, smiling absently at their antics, but her mind is stuck on something Will said.

She’d assumed that Hopper was Jonathan’s stepdad, and that El and Will were either his step-siblings or half-siblings, since she heard El

call him Dad at the party. But Will just called him Hop, the way Jonathan does—the way lots of people do, according to Hopper himself. She can't think of a good explanation for why Will and El call him something different. It doesn't matter, not really, but she files it away to ask Jonathan about sometime.

For now, she shakes it from her mind and joins Steve in gently teasing the kids.

—

On a sunny afternoon in April, Nancy comes into Family Video alone.

Robin's heart stops when she sees her, or maybe it picks up speed. She isn't sure which. Either way, she suddenly feels as if she can't breathe.

She's only really seen Nancy in winter clothes before—loose jeans, soft sweaters, thick jackets. But it's warm now finally, for real it seems, actually spring and not just one of the few isolated days of nice weather that happen sometimes in February and March. And Nancy has adjusted her wardrobe accordingly. She's wearing a skirt now with a short-sleeved blouse, her hair pulled up to keep it off her neck except for the few curls that have escaped. The gentle pastels have given way to slightly brighter colors, and Nancy Wheeler is positively glowing.

"Hi," says Robin, hoping her voice doesn't sound as strangled as it feels. She watches Nancy come towards her, mouth dry. *Stop thinking about her like that*, she berates herself. *She's your friend. Your heterosexual friend.* But Nancy is beautiful, and Robin is only human, and it's impossible not to notice the way the skirt curves around her hips, the slightly low-cut top.

"Hi," says Nancy. She's reached the counter and she's smiling. Her teeth are perfect. "How are you?"

Either floating or drowning, Robin thinks, and says, "I'm fine." Then she clears her throat and adds, "Steve isn't here today, sorry."

“Sorry to miss him,” says Nancy, but her face betrays no disappointment. If anything she seems almost glad, although Robin’s sure she’s imagining it, just seeing what she wants to see. Nancy’s just being polite. All the same, she can’t stop the horrible hope from swooping in her chest.

It’s replaced quickly by guilt, though. Nancy wouldn’t want to be alone with her if she knew what Robin was. She has a brief, insane compulsion to throw Nancy out and lock the door.

Instead, she says, “How was class?”

A slight flush appears in Nancy’s cheeks, and Robin has to stop herself from visibly cringing. She shouldn’t have let on that she has Nancy’s schedule memorized, that she knows exactly which hours she can reasonably spend hoping—and trying not to hope—that Nancy will walk in the door. She’d be embarrassed too if she found out that some guy had *her* schedule committed to memory.

But the awkwardness is so brief that Robin is left wondering if maybe she had imagined the whole thing. “Terrible,” Nancy says, with an exaggerated sigh.

“I thought you were one of those nerds who’s always excited about school?” Robin teases.

“I *am* . I mean—” Nancy looks a little flustered, though not upset. “Not a *nerd*. I’m actually very cool, I’ll have you know. But I do like school! It’s just that I also...hate it very much sometimes.”

Robin laughs. “Which class was it?”

“Ethics in Journalism,” says Nancy with a distaste that doesn’t seem to match the very benign-sounding subject matter. “It’s *awful*!”

“Doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It *is*, Robin!” Robin tries to ignore the sudden glow that ignites in her stomach at the sound of her name in Nancy’s voice. “It’s the professor, he’s such a *hypocrite*, he...”

Nancy launches into a long tirade against her ethics professor, who is,

apparently, not only a hypocrite but also a chauvinist pig, a boring lecturer, and a terrible journalist to boot. Robin finds herself only half-listening, not because she isn't interested—she is, she's interested in *everything* Nancy has to say—but because it's hard to focus on Nancy's words when she's so caught up in her fluent hand motions, her expressive mouth and eyes, and the unwavering smoothness of her voice.

Nancy ends up staying for over an hour, and Robin finds herself chatting easily with her between customers. It's her first time really being alone with Nancy, she realizes—usually Jonathan or Steve is there as a kind of buffer. She had been terrified when Nancy had first come in that it would be unbearably awkward. But she's surprised by how natural it feels, how right, to talk to her like this.

It occurs to her that maybe, somehow, Nancy really *does* like her—not the way Robin wishes she did, of course, but at least as a friend. If she's stuck around here for so long without Steve to witness it, maybe she does genuinely enjoy Robin's company on its own merits. Maybe there isn't an ulterior motive.

She tries not to think too hard about that. If she lets herself admit that she and Nancy are genuinely friends, she's in real danger of falling more deeply in love than ever.

—

Jonathan's photography has been selected for a student exhibition.

He tells them this on a slow Tuesday morning when he and Nancy are hanging out at Family Video, as has become something of a routine on the days they don't have class till the afternoon. He says it in a mumble, blushing, clearly embarrassed to admit that it's a big deal.

"That's awesome, man!" says Steve enthusiastically, and Jonathan's flush deepens. His hands are shoved into his pockets, his shoulders hunched up in that self-conscious way that Robin's come to find sort of endearing. "Congratulations, seriously."

"Thanks," Jonathan manages. "I, uh, they're having an open house

this weekend. So people can come even if they aren't students. It's free."

There's a short silence, before Nancy says, a hint of a smirk on her face, "Jonathan's trying to invite you to come see his artwork. Three o'clock on Saturday."

"It's not *artwork*, it's just some photos—"

"—which must be pretty good if the university is gonna display them," Robin interrupts him. "Jonathan, that's amazing. Of course we'll be there."

She realizes that she's just accepted on Steve's behalf, too, but when she glances at him for confirmation that he'll come he's already saying, "Yeah, of course we will."

Jonathan smiles gratefully at both of them. "Thank you," he says. "But really, there's no obligation, you only have to come if you really want to—"

"We do," says Steve firmly.

Robin looks to Nancy. "You'll be there too?" She's a little afraid of the answer. She'll be crushed if Nancy says no—she's *always* crushed, these days, when she hopes to see Nancy and doesn't—but she's also a bit worried about going into cardiac arrest if she has to walk around in an art gallery with a dressed-up Nancy Wheeler, whether Steve and Jonathan are there or not.

"I can't," Nancy says, and Robin feels a strong flood of relief tinged with regret. "I have a meeting for the student paper that I really can't miss, unfortunately, not if I want to make editor next year. But it's open to students all week so I'm gonna go see it tomorrow."

"I didn't know you were trying for editor," says Steve, sounding impressed. "This little friend group really is just chock full of success."

"Well, I'm not the editor *yet*," says Nancy, but she's smiling, and so is Robin because it's the first time she's ever heard anyone refer to what the four of them have as a *friend group*. She's never really had one of

those before. It's a pretty good feeling.

"It's only a matter of time," says Jonathan.

Robin's in her room getting ready to leave when she hears the phone ring down the hall. A moment later, her mom calls from the kitchen, "Robin! It's for you."

She glances at the clock on her nightstand, somewhere between annoyed and intrigued. Steve's supposed to pick her up to take her to Jonathan's exhibition in a few minutes and she isn't quite ready to leave. But no one ever calls, not for her, and her heart leaps with that automatic childish dream of a sudden phone call that will change her life.

It quickly becomes apparent that that will not be the case when she takes the phone from her mom and hears Steve's voice. "Hey, Robs," he says.

"Steve? How did you even get this number?"

"Looked it up," he says. "Listen, I'm really sorry, but I can't make it today. I'm pretty sick. I thought this morning I'd be fine to go but I've just gotten worse all day so I think I should stay home."

"Oh." Robin glances at the kitchen clock as if she doesn't already know exactly what time it is. The exhibition opens in ten minutes. She could bike, but she'll be late and she'll get there dripping in sweat. And she really, really doesn't want to have to ask her mom for a ride. She tries to suppress her annoyance; it isn't Steve's *fault* that he's sick.

But then Steve is saying, "I already called Jonathan, he hadn't left yet, so he's gonna come pick you up—"

"Wait, wait, wait, you called *Jonathan*? How did you get *his* number?"

"Looked it up," he says again, impatiently, which Robin supposes is fair given how stupid the question is. "I told him how to get to your

house but I couldn't remember the exact address so I told him you'd be standing outside. He'll probably be there in a couple minutes, his house is pretty close to yours if I remember right. Anyway, have fun, tell me all about it."

Then, to her irritation, Steve hangs up.

"Shit," she mutters, and puts down the phone.

It's not that she doesn't want to go if Steve won't be there. She's excited to see Jonathan's work for the first time. But she feels horribly, irrationally guilty making Jonathan come pick her up, especially since it means he's risking being late for his own event. There's nothing she can do about it, though. He's almost certainly already left the house, and she isn't going to make him come all the way here just to tell him to his face that she can't accept a ride.

She finishes getting ready as quickly as she can and then steps outside just in time to see Jonathan's crumbling old car pulling up her street. He's driving slowly, clearly looking carefully at all the houses to make sure he doesn't miss her. The little bit of his face she can make out through the window looks relieved when he spots her. He pulls into her driveway.

"Hey," she says when she pulls open the passenger door and gets in. "I'm so sorry about Steve. I wouldn't have made you come pick me up, I could have biked—"

"It's no problem," says Jonathan with a smile. "Honestly, it's better than showing up at this thing alone."

"But you're gonna be late now."

"Good," he says. "Less time I have to spend making small talk with people I don't know."

Robin can't help but snort at that. It's a completely ridiculous image, Jonathan Byers standing around and chatting with strangers in a room full of well-dressed adults with annual salaries.

Jonathan glances over at her. "You look nice," he says.

“Oh. Thanks.” She glances down at herself. She certainly doesn’t look fancy, but she had at least made an effort. Black slacks instead of jeans, a button-up shirt instead of the hoodie she’s usually wearing at work. Her chunky black boots aren’t exactly classy, but they’re at least better than the scribbled-on red Converse that were the only alternative. “You too,” she adds belatedly, and he flashes her a brief smile before returning his eyes to the road.

The event is more or less what Robin had anticipated—a big room full of vaguely fancy-looking people milling about and looking at the art scattered across the walls. There’s a table in the corner with cheese and crackers, which she supposes is the fine arts department’s thrifty version of elegant hors d’oeuvres. A couple people approach Jonathan in the beginning to talk to him—his professors, he tells her afterwards—but mostly, they’re left alone. Robin’s noticed that some of the art students are standing beside their work, ready to talk about it with the viewers and answer questions. Jonathan seems uninterested in doing this. She doesn’t blame him.

He shows Robin most of the other art in the room before getting to his own, and she gets the sense he’s trying to work up the courage. But when they finally reach the photography section, she can’t imagine what he had been so worried about.

His work is gorgeous.

There are only six photographs, arranged in a row. They aren’t very large and from a distance they look ordinary, like something one might find taped to any fridge in the world. There are people in most of them, and Robin realizes with a smile that they’re people she knows. There’s one of Mrs. Byers in profile at the kitchen table. El and Will playing in the yard, shot through an open door. A silhouette that she recognizes as Nancy’s.

And, to her surprise, the last one is of Steve.

“At El and Will’s party,” says Jonathan quietly, and she startles slightly, not having realized he was paying such close attention to her reactions. “I wasn’t planning to take his picture, I was just getting regular birthday photos. But there was this moment. He was just standing there watching the kids, and I...” He trails off, then says,

"Maybe it's good he couldn't make it. He probably wouldn't like it much."

"He'd love it," says Robin. She says it automatically, reassuring Jonathan without even thinking, but after a moment's reflection she decides that it's the truth. He'd be embarrassed by it, probably; he'd be startled to see the soft fondness on his own face that Jonathan had managed to capture. But he'd love it.

"I hope so," says Jonathan.

They go back to Benny's afterwards. For a while they just talk about the exhibition, making fun of some of the tackier pieces now that there's no one around to overhear. But when that line of conversation dies out, Robin decides to ask him something that she's been on her mind for a little while.

"Why do you and El and Will call Hopper different things?"

Jonathan gives her a long, somewhat incredulous look. "You've heard of divorce?" he asks drily. "Remarrying?"

She rolls her eyes. "Of course I know what *divorce* is, asshole. So he's your stepdad?"

"Yeah." Jonathan says it with an air of finality, like he doesn't intend to go on, but then seems to change his mind. "He and my mom got married pretty recently, actually. They've been friends for a while, though, so them finally tying the knot was—a bit of a foregone conclusion, I guess."

She can't help but be curious about his real dad, and why he's never mentioned him, but she doesn't ask. They aren't close enough for that, and besides, she's never liked answering questions about her own out-of-the-picture father. "So if he's your stepdad—I mean, that all makes sense. I guess what I was really wondering—why do El and Will call him different things? I mean, if they're twins? Are they both your step-siblings or both your biological siblings? Sorry," she adds, a little sheepishly, realizing that this too is kind of a personal question.

"No, it's okay," says Jonathan, but he hesitates a moment before

actually answering the question. “Will’s my biological brother,” he says eventually. “El is...Hopper adopted her a couple years before he married my mom.”

“So they aren’t actually twins.”

“No. Same age, though, we think.”

Robin had been about to take a sip of her drink, but at this she puts it down abruptly, eyebrows raised. “You *think* ?”

For the first time since she started questioning him, Jonathan looks a little bit uncomfortable, like he’s realized he shouldn’t have said that. She almost apologizes again, but before she can decide exactly what words to say, he’s speaking. “I—El doesn’t ever talk about it and my mom and Hop don’t say a lot, either, so I don’t really—she came from a really bad place. Like, human trafficking kind of bad.”

“Oh, my god.” She tries to imagine El—the sweetest of the kids, the softest, an absolute ray of sunshine—surrounded by anything other than a loving family and her loyal friends. She can’t picture it. She doesn’t want to. “That’s...Jesus, that’s horrible. I had no idea.”

“Yeah,” says Jonathan. “We don’t even have, like, a birth certificate or anything for her. Legally, she didn’t even exist until Hop adopted her. So that’s why she’s Will twin—why they share a birthday, anyway. We don’t know her real birthday, and she and Will have always been really close, even before they were officially brother and sister, so she decided she’d rather share his birthday than pick a random date. This year was only the second birthday of her entire life. She never had anything to celebrate before then.”

Robin’s silent, unsure how to respond, unsure how to even begin processing that. She’s a little afraid she might cry, actually. It wouldn’t be unwarranted. Jesus, that poor kid.

Jonathan clears his throat.

“So, anyway. To answer your question. Hopper is Will and I’s stepdad, so we call him Hop—everyone does, no one but my mom ever calls him Jim—and he’s El’s real dad, or her adopted dad

anyway, so she calls him Dad. And she calls my mom Mom because—well, because she wants to, I guess. I don't know. Families are complicated."

"That's for sure," says Robin. She thinks of her own family, just her and her mom—so simple compared with Jonathan's, and yet still so complicated in its own way. "You're a good brother, you know."

He flushes, but also appears to be fighting a small, proud smile. "Thanks."

He *is* a good brother—a good friend, too. A good person. Robin thinks she might love him.

Not for the first time, it occurs to her how much easier everything would be if she could just be *in* love with him.

—

They're hanging out at Steve's place when he says to her, suddenly, "You know, I've been thinking about moving."

"Yeah?" She's at the fridge, getting them both beers, and she pulls them out and shuts the door with her foot before continuing. "How come?"

"My lease is up next month and my bitch of a landlord's been hinting about raising the rent." He nods his silent thanks as she hands him his drink and then sits down next to him on the couch. "Thought I might try to find someplace a little nicer, too."

"Can you afford someplace nicer?" It isn't terrible, what they make at Family Video, but it's not a lot either.

"Maybe." He's silent for a long time, just sort of *looking* at her, and Robin feels as if she's being scrutinized. Just as she's about to ask him why in the world he's staring at her like that, he blurts out, sounding almost nervous, "I was wondering if maybe you'd like to look for a place together."

Robin just stares at him, not certain she's understood him right. Surely he means—surely he's just asking for her help in finding a new

place for himself. After all, she has reminded him often enough that she has by far the better taste of the two of them.

But based on his face, that doesn't seem to be what he's saying.

"Just to be clear—" she starts.

"I'm asking if you want to move in with me," says Steve.

Oh.

"I—"

"Into a two-bedroom, obviously. I mean, unless you want to keep living with your mom, that's totally fine too. You don't, like, *have* to move in with me. I just thought, together, we could maybe afford someplace a little nicer—I mean—I'm not asking you *just* so I can get a nicer place, I also—"

"Steve," she interrupts.

"Yeah?"

She feels warm inside, buoyant, and it's all she can do not to laugh with relief and joy. She's so happy she could cry, honestly, though she refuses to let herself do that.

There's a lot to consider, she knows. Money will be tight, even with a roommate. It'll be hard to swing. It's why she hasn't moved out of her mom's house already—she can't afford it, not on top of her classes. But with Steve, she might be able to make it work. It sounds doable. It sounds amazing.

It sounds perfect.

"I'll think about it," she tells him, and means it.

—

The first thing Robin hears when she comes in to work is Steve's laughter, raucous and loud. He's standing on the wrong side of the counter, perched against it, and when Robin gets closer she realizes

that there are actual tears in his eyes. Jonathan is there too, also laughing, though a little more quietly. There's no sign of Nancy.

It warms her heart, seeing the two of them together. Somehow, without her even noticing, Jonathan has become her closest friend after Steve. Though she has no idea what they're laughing about, watching them makes her inexplicably happy. *Friend group*, she remembers Steve calling them a couple weeks back.

"Robin!" says Steve through his laughter when he eventually notices her.

"Steve!" she mimics him, and then in a more normal voice, "Hey, Jonathan."

"Hey," he says, but the smile has abruptly drained from his face. He looks suddenly anxious, for some reason, as if stressed and unhappy to see her.

She has no idea what that's about. "How are you?" she asks him, striving for normalcy.

"I'm fine," he says, and then, "I've gotta run, unfortunately—group project on campus." He smiles at her then, but there's something tight and unnatural in it. And then he's gone.

"What was that about?" she asks Steve, bewildered, once the door has shut behind him.

Steve looks as confused as her, as well as disappointed. "I have no idea. He seemed normal until just then."

So she hadn't imagined it—Jonathan had been happy, and then had run off because she arrived. She runs through all of her recent interactions with Jonathan, trying to think of anything she might have done or said to upset him. She comes up blank.

So much for *friend group*, she thinks, and tries not to feel too hurt.

—

Whatever had upset Jonathan, it seems to be resolved by the next

time she sees him. He greets her normally, happy, when he and Nancy arrive at the store to pick up Steve and Robin. Robin is relieved; she'd spent the past few days worried—irrationally, it seems now—that Jonathan hated her, that he wouldn't show up to go out with the rest of them today like they'd planned. She still doesn't know what happened, but decides not to ask. She doesn't want to push her luck.

"Ready to go?" Nancy asks, tossing her car keys up and down with one hand.

Robin slides the bag of cash from the register into the safe under the counter and locks it, then straightens back up. "Now I am. Steve?" she calls, raising her voice to reach him in the back room.

"Yeah, just a second!" He emerges a moment later, ruffling his own hair unconsciously, and then claps his hands. "Alright. Let's do this."

This is a dingy ice cream place on the edge of town that one of Nancy's classmates had recommended. It's in a mostly abandoned strip mall, the lights on the façade flickering a bit ominously. From the street, there doesn't appear to be a single customer inside.

"You sure this is it?" Steve asks skeptically.

"Yeah, of course," says Nancy. She shuts off the engine. "Are you doubting me, Harrington?"

"Yes. I am very much doubting you. One hundred percent."

Robin's never heard Nancy call Steve by his last name before. There's no reason it should bother her—she calls Steve that all the time, and *she* certainly isn't in love with him—but it does, for some reason. *This is what you want*, she reminds herself.

"You okay?" asks Jonathan quietly.

She realizes that she's accidentally hung back a bit while Nancy and Steve head for the door. She shakes herself as if to physically throw off the unpleasant feeling of triumph mixed with foreboding. "Yeah, of course."

“Okay,” says Jonathan, and instead of running ahead to catch up with Steve and Nancy, he stays by her to accompany her inside.

Once they’ve ordered, they take their ice cream cones outside to the rickety picnic table. Without thinking, Robin slides in next to Jonathan. Nancy ends up across from her. Their knees knock slightly. “Sorry,” says Nancy.

“It’s okay,” says Robin.

Her eyes meet Nancy’s. For a moment, she feels stuck in time, utterly frozen, as if the entire world has stopped. Nancy is looking back at her with an expression she can’t quite identify—serious but not sad, searching but not inquisitive, honest but not revealing. It makes warmth explode through Robin’s chest, tingle down her arms and into her fingers. It occurs to her that this is dangerous, that she needs to look away *right now*, but somehow she can’t. Whatever it is in Nancy’s eyes, it’s keeping Robin trapped there.

“Holy *fuck*, ” says Steve, and then Nancy looks away, and the moment is over. “This is *good*. ”

“I told you,” says Nancy, sounding both smug and fond.

They’re flirting, Robin realizes sinkingly, actually flirting, right in front of her. She turns to Jonathan and strikes up a quieter conversation just with him, giving Nancy and Steve room to carry on falling in love without interruption.

But it doesn’t last, this separation. Nancy and Steve quickly erupt into good-natured argument and call on Robin and Jonathan to intervene, which they do, and then all four of them are talking together again, shouting over each other, laughing. To her satisfaction, and yet almost against her will, Robin finds that even with Nancy and Steve sitting so close together she really is enjoying herself. The four of them just fit together so easily, as friends, no matter how it’s broken up romantically. She thinks back to the first time they hung out outside of Family Video—she’d thought it was like a double date, with her and Steve as the one fake couple and Nancy and Jonathan as the real one. Now it’s Steve and Nancy who are together, or at least they will be, if all goes according to plan. And if that makes her and

Jonathan the other couple—honestly, she's such good friends with him, that she doesn't even mind much.

Unless he really is into you, and you're leading him on, whispers the traitorous voice in her head, but she quickly shushes it. That seems no more likely now than it had a month ago. Jonathan isn't interested in her any more than Steve is.

It's hours later before they get back to the video store to pick up Steve's car. The sun has long since gone down and a chill is creeping into the air despite how warm the day had been. Robin's shivering a bit, actually, though she tries not to let it be too obvious.

She stops just before climbing into the passenger seat of Steve's car. "Bye, Jonathan," she says; "bye, Nance."

She doesn't register what she's just said until she notices that Nancy's gone so red that it's visible even in the dim glow of the street light. *Fuck*, Robin thinks. She's overstepped a boundary. Of course Nancy is embarrassed—probably on Robin's behalf as much as her own. Robin has no right to call her Nance; that's what Jonathan calls her sometimes, and they've been friends for years, even dated for a time. It's an intimate nickname, and here Robin is, using it even though they've only known each other a couple of months and only really been friends for a fraction of that time.

She doesn't get a chance to say anything else, doesn't even know what she would say if she had time. Steve has slammed the driver's door shut and started the engine and she has no choice but to get in and leave with him.

The look on Nancy's face haunts her all the way home.

—

The next time she sees El and Max, they're holding hands.

It's just the two of them in the store today, and it's Steve's day off. Neither El nor Max say anything about it so Robin doesn't either, though she's unable to wipe the stupid grin off her face the entire time she's talking to them. Max has never looked happier.

Her resolve to act normal finally breaks when they're on their way out. "Hey, Max?" she calls, just before she and El reach the door.

Max turns back to her, a question in her face.

"I'm proud of you," says Robin.

—

She's alone with Nancy again at the video store. It's early—she'd let Nancy in before they were technically even open—and the air itself seems to quiver with all the morning glow of a warm and golden day. Though she isn't in school anymore, Robin doesn't think that this time of year will ever lose its sense of satisfaction, of anticipation, of things all at once beginning and drawing to a close.

They're quiet this morning, in a peaceful sort of way. Nancy is reading something for class while Robin runs through the various small tasks of her job. Both of them are sipping the coffees that Nancy had brought with her. It's not the first time she's done this. She knows Robin's order by heart now.

The atmosphere is so tranquil, so idyllic despite the mundane setting of Family Video, that Robin is loath to break the easy silence. She has a burning question, though—something she's been wondering for months and that, for whatever reason, is especially heavy on her mind this morning. Eventually, she just says it.

"Why did you and Jonathan break up?"

Nancy looks up from her book, eyebrows raised slightly in an expression of faint surprise.

"Sorry," says Robin. "Just, the kids had mentioned that you used to be together. And you and Jonathan are so close. You seem like you'd be perfect."

Nancy hesitates a long time before speaking, though Robin can tell that she's considering her answer carefully rather than just ignoring the question.

"We decided we were better off as friends," she says eventually.

She says this delicately, scrutinizing Robin, as if she's sizing her up. Robin almost wants to apologize, though she isn't sure for what.

Then Nancy asks, "Why aren't you and Steve together?"

Robin stares at her. A thousand different answers run through her head. After a moment, she settles on the one that is both the most and the least true of them all.

"We're just better off as friends," she says.

—

Somehow, suddenly, it's almost summer.

The kids have begun to talk with excitement and poorly suppressed nervousness about starting high school in the fall. College is coming up more and more with them, too. The boys have all asserted that they'll be going far away, studying great things and preparing for great careers. El hasn't expressed any desire to leave home, but even she is getting excited about the prospect of a life beyond the narrow confines of childhood. Max never brings up college at all—Robin gets the sense that she can't really envision being able to afford it, and resolves to talk to her—but she, too, talks incessantly about what the next few years will bring, about driving, working, freedom. To all of them, the future is vast and promising and just within reach.

Robin graduated a year ago now. It feels like longer.

She's happy, for the most part, though none of this is what she grew up wanting for herself. She's found that with Nancy and Jonathan and Steve in her life, she doesn't spend so much time regretting all the things that could have been. They help to smooth over the pain of being unable to go to a real university, of still living at home, of being a full year out of high school and no closer to figuring out what she really wants to do with her life.

She still has dreams. But sometimes, she wonders if all this—the kids, her friends, this life that's little and insignificant but *hers*—might just be enough.

—

The first week of summer vacation, Nancy and Jonathan come into Family Video looking as solemn as Robin has ever seen them.

There are a few other customers in the store—there usually are, now that everyone is out of school—and Nancy and Jonathan wait until they have left before approaching the counter.

“There’s something we should talk about,” says Nancy.

Robin feels her heart drop into her stomach.

“Look, we like you guys,” she continues. “We really, really like you. And we’ve really enjoyed hanging out with you.”

Steve’s eyebrows are furrowed. “What are you saying? Are you, like, leaving the country?”

Jonathan laughs, but it’s a thin, strangled sound. “No. No, we aren’t leaving the country.”

“So what is this about?” asks Robin. Somewhere in her abdomen, her heart is pounding painfully. What Nancy’s saying—it sounds like a breakup. It sounds like *I love you, but*. It sounds like she and Jonathan never want to see them again.

She’s known it all along, somewhere deep inside herself, but now, faced with losing them, it’s startlingly, blindingly clear: now that loves Jonathan, now that she’s in love with Nancy, she doesn’t want to learn how to live without either one of them.

“We haven’t been fair to you guys,” says Nancy. “We, uh. Haven’t been honest.”

“Okay?” says Steve. He sounds as confused as Robin feels. “What have you been lying about, then?”

“We haven’t been *lying* exactly, we just...” Jonathan trails off, looking lost. “We’ve been misleading you, I think.”

“Leading you on, rather.”

Jonathan nods, looking miserable, which Robin doesn’t really think is

fair. He and Nancy are the ones trying to terminate this friendship; what right does *he* have to be upset about it?

“Look, I’ll just say it,” says Nancy finally. “Steve, I don’t like you. Not like that.”

“And Robin,” says Jonathan, “I don’t, either. Like you, I mean. I mean—I *like* you, I do, I like you a lot. But not...romantically. I’m really, really sorry for leading you on.”

“Oh,” say Robin and Steve at the same time.

“I’m so sorry,” says Nancy, sounding wrecked.

“So you...” Steve stops, clears his throat, starts again. “I mean, just to clarify. You *do* still like us, like, as friends, right? I mean, you still want to be friends?”

“Yeah, of course,” says Jonathan, and Robin is so relieved that she feels almost faint. She wants to laugh, to scream with joy, because this is the best-case scenario, really. She doesn’t *want* Jonathan to be in love with her. And as for Nancy...Steve must be heartbroken, she knows, though he’s doing a good job of handling the rejection at the moment. But if Nancy really isn’t interested in him, then she can give up this painful business of trying to help the two of them fall in love. She’s so giddy with relief that she almost misses what Nancy is saying.

“In the interest of full disclosure, though...” Nancy swallows hard and Robin realizes, suddenly, that this is the first time she’s ever seen Nancy Wheeler looking nervous. “I think there’s something else you should know.” A long pause. “Did we ever tell you guys why we broke up?”

“You said you were better off as friends,” says Robin.

Nancy lets out a breathy laugh. “Yeah. Well. That, and...” She looks to Jonathan for support.

Jonathan takes a deep breath, squeezes his eyes shut, opens them again. “I don’t like girls,” he says.

“And I do,” adds Nancy, a little faintly.

There are a lot of emotions happening inside of Robin, so many that she isn’t entirely sure what to do with them all. A desperate, euphoric elation is blooming in her, so strong and so unexpected that she’s a little dizzy with it—but she can’t let on, not now, not in front of Steve. His heart’s just been broken; she isn’t going to make it worse by flaunting her happiness in front of him. And Nancy might be gay, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. There are a lot of girls out there. It doesn’t mean that she’s in love with *Robin*, of all people.

“Sorry,” says Jonathan, and Robin realizes that there’s been a long silence, that she’s failed to react at all to her friends’ coming out. She’s still trying to put words together when Steve, to her surprise, speaks first.

“No, it’s—that’s okay,” he says. “That’s great. It’s—I mean, it’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

If she weren’t already feeling so many other things at once, Robin thinks she would burst out laughing at Steve’s fumbling affirmation. As it is, she can hardly even breathe around the realization that Steve—the person she cares most about in the world—the person who cares about *her* most in the world—the person to whom she most desperately wants to tell her secret, and yet to whom she’s most afraid of telling it—Steve doesn’t care. He doesn’t care.

There are tears in her eyes, she realizes. “I...”

Jonathan looks a little concerned. “Robin?”

“No, no, I’m fine—everything is fine—it’s—like Steve said—” She cuts herself off, unsure where that sentence is trying to go, unsure she’s even capable of getting it the rest of the way out.

Nancy starts to say something else, but then the bell above the door jingles as a large family group pushes their way into the store. Robin glances at the customers, more annoyed at their timing than she thinks she’s ever been in her life. *Go away!* she wants to scream, but of course she doesn’t. She returns her attention to Nancy, about to ask her to continue with whatever it was she was going to say.

But Nancy and Jonathan have turned away and are headed for the door.

—

“It’s too bad,” says Steve.

Robin freezes. The large, intruding family have just left—she hardly even remembers checking them out, caught up as she is in trying to process everything that Nancy and Jonathan have said—and the store is empty again, save the two of them. “What do you mean?” she asks carefully, though she thinks she knows the answer. The euphoria drains out of her as quickly as it had come. She doesn’t want her friendship with Steve to end like this.

“You and Jonathan would have been great together,” he says.

That isn’t what she had expected. She had been bracing herself for a homophobic rant, for him to reveal that he’d only been pretending to be okay with it while Nancy and Jonathan were still there to avoid causing a scene. It’s a relief, at least, that that doesn’t seem to be the case. But the casual reminder that Jonathan is the one she’s *supposed* to be in love with still hurts, for some reason, coming from Steve. She feels as if a rubber band inside of her has suddenly snapped. “I don’t like Jonathan,” she says shortly. “Not like that.”

Steve scoffs, but when he speaks, his voice is gentle rather than derisive. “You don’t have to pretend, Robs. I’ve seen the way you act when he’s around. You know you always get, like, ten shades redder than usual the second he and Nancy walk through the door?”

“Fuck off, no I don’t,” she says automatically.

But there’s something happening in her stomach, in her chest, a tension running through her body that’s been there for *years* now and, god, she just can’t stand it anymore. She’s so sick of pretending, of bluffing, of lying by omission. She’s so sick of it.

“Steve?” she says, and hopes her voice doesn’t sound as shaky as it feels.

“Yeah?”

She takes a deep breath. “You know how I said there was never anyone I was interested in in high school?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Well, that...wasn’t quite true?”

Steve furrows his brows at her. “Okay,” he says, clearly not getting it.

“There was this—this girl in my history class. Tammy. She...” She clenches and unclenches her fist a few times, trying to gain control over her emotions. “I like girls, Steve. I always have.”

For a long moment he just stares at her. He opens his mouth, closes it again. Then he says, “Oh.”

“Oh,” she echoes, and almost laughs, or maybe almost cries. She swallows hard. “So, yeah. I, uh, I was never interested in Jonathan. Obviously.”

She can see in Steve’s face that he’s trying to process this, trying to square it with everything he thought he knew about her crush on Jonathan. “Then why—”

She screws her eyes shut. “Because Nancy Wheeler is the most beautiful person I have ever seen.”

This is it, she thinks. The end of our friendship. Because they’re both in love with the same girl, only Robin had to go and be a *dyke* about it, and even if Nancy doesn’t actually like her back, even if Steve doesn’t care about the dyke part, how could he ever forgive Robin for having a chance with Nancy when he doesn’t anymore?

Steve is silent for a long time. Then, to her surprise, he starts laughing. Hard. She opens her eyes and stares at him. “What the fuck?”

“Oh, my god. Oh my god. Thank god.”

“What do you mean, *thank god*? ” asks Robin, bewildered. “I thought you’d be, like, super pissed.”

“Pissed? Why?”

“Because—I mean, you like Nancy too, right?”

“*God*, no,” says Steve, laughing again, and then he grows serious. “No, I, uh...no.” A very long pause. Then he continues quietly, “It’s, uh. It’s Jonathan. It’s always been Jonathan.”

“*Jonathan?* You hardly even gave him a second glance when they first started coming here, it was always Nancy you were talking to!”

“Yeah,” says Steve, “because I was absolutely *terrified* of talking to Jonathan. And, anyway, Jonathan’s the one *you’re* always talking to.”

He has a point. “Well, yeah, that’s because I’m—”

“—terrified of talking to Nancy?”

She starts to laugh—slowly at first, a little shakily, because she still can’t believe that all this is really happening. And then, without quite being able to pinpoint where the change happens, she’s sobbing.

“Robin?” says Steve, sounding a little alarmed, though his voice is a bit thick as well. “You okay?”

She nods into her hands. “Yeah,” she says, and it’s all she can get out, but she means it. She’s okay. Steve knows her secret, and he still loves her anyway, and he has the *same* secret, and she’s okay.

She’s okay.

“Come here, loser,” says Steve, and pulls her into a hug. She wraps her arms around him, squeezing tightly, and doesn’t comment on the patch of wetness she can feel growing on her shoulder where his face is pressed.

They stand in silence for a few minutes before something occurs to Robin, and she pulls back a bit. “Wait, so you were...all this time, with Jonathan? But you just said how great he and I would have been together!”

“Well.” He looks a bit embarrassed. “I thought you were into him,

and obviously *I* couldn't be with him, so..." Then he, too, seems to suddenly realize something. "Wait. You've been trying to set me up with Nancy! You faked a school thing—don't look at me like that, I can *tell* when you're lying to me, Robs—you faked a school thing just to set me up on a date with her!"

She shrugs, not bothering to fight a smile. "I thought *you* were into *her*. And I figured at least one of us should get to be happy."

Steve flashes her a slightly watery grin. "You're a good friend, you know."

"You too," says Robin. She hesitates, then adds, honestly, "You're the best friend I've ever had."

"You're going soft, Buckley," says Steve, but his voice is still trembling a bit, and she knows him well enough by now to know that what he really means is *you're the best friend I've ever had, too*. Then suddenly his voice goes serious, urgent. "Wait. Nancy just came in here and told you she's a lesbian and you *didn't say anything back*? What's wrong with you!"

"Jonathan just did the same thing! What's wrong with *you*?"

"Oh, my god," says Steve. "They must think we hate them. Oh, my god."

"We don't even know that they like us like that," says Robin.

Steve grins. "Well," he says, "there's only one way to find out."

Robin doesn't have to ask what he's thinking. She's already pulling out the *Be Right Back!* sign from under the counter, the one they're under strict orders from Keith not to use unless there's an absolute emergency. This counts as an emergency.

They're on the way out the door when Robin suddenly stops. "Wait," she says.

"What are you doing?" he asks impatiently. "We have to catch them!"

"Just a second." She hops back over the counter, pulls out the white

board, and draws one thin line under *You Rule*.

They catch up with Nancy and Jonathan a block from Jonathan's house.

Steve pulls up beside them at a stop sign. Robin rolls down the passenger side window and waves wildly. "Hey!" she shouts. "Nancy! Jonathan!"

Jonathan turns toward the noise, then rolls down his window when he realizes that it's Robin, hanging out of Steve's car. "What?"

He looks a little apprehensive, and Robin realizes suddenly what this must look like to him—he and Nancy have just confessed that they're both gay, and now they're being confronted about it in the street. Robin decides to put him out of his misery as quickly as possible.

"I'm a lesbian," she says bluntly.

Jonathan's jaw drops, and before he can say anything, Nancy is leaning forward in her seat to peer past him. "I'm sorry, *what?* "

"Robin's gay," says Steve. "And so am I. And Jonathan..." Behind her, Robin can hear Steve's sharp, anxious intake of breath, though she keeps her eyes trained on Nancy's. "I think I'm in love with you, man."

And then—Robin doesn't know exactly how it happens—all four of them are throwing open the doors, getting out of the cars, running to meet each other. Steve catches Jonathan in a tight embrace, but Robin hardly has time to be happy for them. She's too focused on Nancy coming towards her—Nancy with her eyebrows raised, shock and bewilderment in her face and maybe, maybe hope.

Robin stops just short of her.

"Hey," says Nancy.

"Hey," says Robin, a little shyly. She looks down at her feet, then back up at Nancy. "So."

“So,” says Nancy, then lets out an awkward, breathy laugh. “I was worried you wouldn’t want to see me again.”

“I did,” says Robin. “I do.”

Her heart is pounding, but it’s different from any other anxiety she’s ever felt. This isn’t fear—this is anticipation.

“Nancy Wheeler,” she says, then takes a step closer. “Would you go out to dinner with me this Friday?”

Nancy nods, her lips tugging into a smile. “I would love to.”

“Good,” says Robin.

And then Nancy kisses her.

“Hey, lovebirds!” shouts Steve, and Robin feels Nancy laugh against her lips before pulling away. Steve’s arm is slung around Jonathan’s shoulder, and Jonathan is blushing so hard it looks almost painful. “We’re gonna go grab something to eat. You in?”

“Of course,” says Nancy. She takes Robin’s hand and tugs her towards the car.

And Robin, grinning, follows.

Author's Note:

If you enjoyed this fic, check out the rest of the work in this Big Bang and feel free to give me a follow on [tumblr!](#)